Hinduism for TODAY

A Seminar in the Philosophy of Hindu Thought and Spirituality



Ramesh N. Patel

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Preface

To consider what Hinduism should be like for today's life and world, we need a clear concept of what Hinduism is. Buddhism, Christianity and Islam, for example, sport clear concepts about their nature. Consequently, producing a simple definition of these faiths is not an issue for them. The matter is different with Hinduism. Who is a Hindu? What is Hinduism? How is Hinduism to be defined? These are thorny questions for Hindus and non-Hindus alike.

Multiple answers have been advanced, but no single answer has achieved real currency. Some answers are not even compatible with others. Many thinkers, including quite a few scholars, have given up, concluding that Hinduism is too complex to be reduced to a simple characterization. This book examines major definitions of Hinduism. It even explores the question of how different types of definition are determined. It arrives at a definition that distinguishes Hinduism from other religions of the world. Further, unlike some definitions that Hindus would not identify with, the definition proposed here is compatible with the character of Hinduism, past and present. The book embodies a substantial discussion of the subject to achieve the definition that won't sacrifice objectivity.

Today's life-world is diverse and multi-faceted. The roots of Hinduism go back past the known human history. Mirroring life itself over millenia, Hinduism has grown to be rich and complex. It is obviously time-tested. But can it be relevant to the demands of today's life? Can it respond to today's needs and values? Can Hinduism be formed in today's idiom to have a foundation on which diverse creative structures can be raised to serve a variety of today's needs? Can such foundation be the anchor for a rewarding future on a long-term basis for humanity as a whole? This book answers all these questions in the affirmative and offers such a foundation for Hinduism along with a discussion of its rationale..

Is it possible to take into account feedback from contemporary Hindus from different walks of life, give them a voice and articulate a form of Hinduism that is compatible with diverse perspectives on life? This book presents a dialog between eight committed Hindus who come from different dimensions of life with the objective to construct a Hinduism that is relevant, vibrant and sound to meet today's challenges.

Four men and women participating in this seminar on the philosophy of Hindu thought and spirituality represent a wide spectrum of views from both inside and outside Hinduism. They include

conservative, moderate and reform Hinduism. They present viewpoints from religion, philosophy, art, feminism and even atheism. Each participant is an individual not wanting to follow anyone's predetermined mold or image. For example, it is possible to think that Sanatan, the conservative Hindu here, is less than a militant firebrand of a prevalent stereotypical imagination. Or, that Mahila, the feminist Hindu in the seminar, is not sufficiently antagonistic toward all men. Someone may even quarrel with the way the participants do not pick quarrels with each other.

The point is that the participants are individuals with minds of their own. They are not going to display straw men chattering about cows, castes and cobras, not to speak of curry and karma. Nor do they whine about a Hollywood concept of West with its emphasis on dance, dollar and divorce, not to speak of debt and deficit. They scrupulously avoid politics. The participants have open minds which can be persuaded by reason. They cannot be pinned down as blind believers, for they are often critical of what they see as problems in Hinduism. They avoid getting caught into distracting drama because they are determined to tackle substantive issues. They won't settle for rhetoric or platitudes.

The seminar participants in this book disdain and expose cheapshots often thrown at Hinduism, hurled from dubious assumptions of a materialism, naturalism, Marxism, secularism, Eurocentric humanism, postmodernism or logocentrism, let alone a power-grabbing political ideology. Above all, they manage their disagreements amicably. Intrinsic tolerance and generosity of Hinduism is one main reason for their achievement of the friendly but intensely discursive style in which they arrive at their destination without throwing temper tantrums. They take their time, flow freely and are never asked to follow a predetermined agenda. They traverse a veritably vast ground before coming to their actively discussed conclusions. Yes, some may still want to see them talking differently. In that case, however, the dissenters would need to write a different book.

Some orthodox Hindus may take issue with the Hinduism for Today developed here, saying that it diverges from a literal fundamentalist or other sectarian standpoint and is unrepresentative for that reason. From the other end of the spectrum, strong Hindu reformists may want to dilute the book's Hinduism beyond recognition into a faceless secular platitude. Both miss the point that optimal Hinduism for Today cannot be a congeries of decadent dogmas of the past or a slavish adoption of a fleeting Western ideology that is an intellectual rage of the moment. It should be a moderate Hinduism that preserves what is positive in its past, fearlessly discards what is narrow and negative and is not averse to

picking up something positive from outside that is compatible with its time-tested wisdom. This book presents such a constructive moderate Hinduism.

Some non-Hindus may criticize the Hinduism for Today enunciated in this book on the basis that this Hinduism is a utopian idealization far from real life Hinduism actually practiced in the past or in the present. The participants in this seminar in the philosophy of Hindu thought and sprirituality would disagree. They would say that their goal is not a documentation or chronicle but a normative undertaking that must, by design, go beyond stereotypes of East or West in order to construct something worthwhile to serve the world today and beyond. But it must be said that Hinduism does not have to be the sole recipient of such "privileged" treatment.

The attitude and methodology applied in this book can surely and desirably be extended to other faiths of the world, including secular humanism and humanitarian scientism, to construct a full line-up of positive but well pondered images of all religious systems. An ensuing dialog between such positively formed world religions would indeed be a thing of beauty. Its time has definitely come. Can we wait for that day to arrive? Such a line-up and dialog would promise much more in terms of global substantial benefit than the fleeting strife-torn ideologies concocted to suit one social group over another that have been prevalent for a while.

Is it not possible to fathom deeper intellectuality in handling the subject? Yes, for this book is intended for a general reader with a serious interest in Hindu thought and spirituality. Those with scholarly interest in the subject at a deeper intellectual level are invited to explore my book *Philosophy of the* Gita, Peter Lang, New York, 1991. Incidentally that book provides a detailed articulation of the hermeneutic methodology applied in this book.

Of course the full line of work implied by this book is not over just with the book. Further work would need to be done, beginning with serious analysis of the book's thesis. The book itself examines an array of objections, alternatives and potential criticisms. Yet it cannot and does not claim any sort of immunity from critical examination of its premises and conclusions. All serious thinking about its Hinduism is welcome, especially if it is clear, coherent and credible on the one hand and constructive enough to field viable alternatives on the other. This book is offered without wild expectations. It may get a silent treatment or aggressive criticism. Personally I should be happy to have some real thoughtful consideration by Hindus as well as others from different persuasions. I should seek to benefit from thoughtful criticism..

The book is a dialog between eight fictional characters which, nevertheless, are variously representative of my thinking at different times in my life. A perceptive reader will notice that a good part of my thinking is revealed in the views expressed by Sevak and Darshana in the seminar. Playing devil's advocate is a teaching tool I have used for decades, annoying my students and friends alike. Some who have witnessed it for long may be able to see how the eight characters in the book catch a little of what I have said from time to time. But no characters here, even collectively, can be said to accurately or fully represent my own thinking in a finalized form or sense. Continuing evolution of my thought is just one reason; more important reason is that my core philosophical thinking comes from a serious consideration of the heart of hard philosophy, what I call logical metaphilosophy. The latter is the subject of another, possibly the next, book.

I had little by way of predetermination in terms of ideas or details through the process of writing this book. As the discussions in the seminar proceeded, a great deal emerged without anticipation. Some of it has surprised me. I won't be surprised if some readers are surprised too. Really, my guess is that anyone who reads the book carefully will find some surprises. This is because there is much here that comes from avenues of thinking that are hitherto unexplored. Meanwhile, this book is offered as an expression of the moods and modes of my thinking designed for the purpose of constructing a Hinduism for Today in the form of a seminar in the philosophy of Hindu thought and spirituality.

A technical matter should be noted at the end. It is about transliteration of Sanskrit terms in this book. My book, *Philosophy of the* Gita, was written for the scholarly community. It consistently used diacritics in rendering Sanskrit terms. This book is intended for the general reader. Hence, I have dropped diacritics. Scholars hardly need them and others find them unhelpful and opaque, if not annoying. My purist Sanskritism rebelled, but I suppressed it. There is a new way of transliterating Sanskrit words that has gained some currency on the internet. It uses upper case letters even in the middle of words and vowels are duplicated to indicate their lengthened forms. But I do not find "Raama" an improvement over "Rama." This system seems to distract and distort. On the other hand diacritics are notoriously opaque. "Krsna" with three dots under its letters at best may create scholarly looks but it is no better than the straightforward "Krishna."

I have rendered Sanskrit words in italics and provided an extensive glossary of Sanskrit terms at the end of the book, which I hope readers will find quite useful. For transliteration I have gone back to the simple, natural and easy system I learnt way back in school when we were asked

to write our names in the Roman script. I still write and say my name as "Ramesh Patel" and wouldn't dare to put it in diacritics to confound everybody. Sure enough this simple system, which does not need elaborate explanation, lacks the phonetic precision of diacritics. For instance, it does not distinguish short and long vowels. But notice that English as we know it is worse. It tolerates ambiguities like "u" sounds in "cut" and "put," or like three different ways in which "a" is pronounced in "father at all." There is less than compelling reason to oblige an unedifying demand for diacritics.

Those who know Sanskrit will figure out the Sanskrit words readily and others won't notice the difference. Compared to diacritics and the new internet system, the old simple method is easier to decipher and pronounce for the general reader. Sanskrit glossary at the end of the book did not have to repeat any words due to system ambiguity. To facilitate further, I have divided Sanskrit compounds with hyphen, except those that would split euphony. A few examples will drive home the point: *Antah-karana, Atharva-veda, Bhagavad-gita, ishta-deva, Maha-bharata, vaisheshika, vana-prastha ashrama, sa-guna, sva-rupa, tata-stha lakshana, Yajnavalkya-smriti, Yajur-veda.*

Ramesh N. Patel
Fairborn, Ohio
September 30, 2012

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Family is foremost in this. My wife Kanta is in the lead here as an unfailing source of stimulative feedback on all matters connected with the book, putting up with inconveniences created by my engagement with writing over the years. My daughter Kairavi Daum, together with Todd, her husband, has played a similar inspirational role. My son, Darshan, too has been a constant source of support and encouragement. My sister, Geeta Patel, has always extended help in connection with the production of the book. Piyush and Sonal Thakkar have been a tremendous source of support and encouragement. My brother, Harish, too has sought to encourage me at various times.

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I do not wish to implicate any of the above in the way the book has reached its final form, for which I bear full responsibility.

OM TAT SAT!

To all constructive Hindus,
who want to preserve and enhance
much that is positive in Hinduism
and to remove and replace
a little that is not.

Now, let's get started!

Anish
Darshana
Madhyama
Mahila
Navin
Sanatan
Sanskriti
Sevak

Hinduism for Today:
A Seminar in the Philosophy of Hindu Thought and Spirituality

Participants in the Seminar:

Sevak Das: Facilitator, constructive Hindu, male, 65, retired professor of Sanskrit

Sanatan Manav: Conservative Hindu, male, 53, principal of a *guru-kul*, a traditional Hindu education center

Madhyama Vani: Moderate Hindu, female, 45, administrative dean, local college

Navin Mohan: Reform Hindu; male, 38, accountant and assistant supervisor at a Gandhian *ashram* or commune

Darshana Samiksha: Philosophical Hindu, female, 55, professor of philosophy

Sanskriti Nartan: Cultural Hindu, female, 34, businesswoman, classical dancer and cultural event organizer

Anish Vijnan: Atheistic Hindu, male, 28, electrical engineer and management consultant

Mahila Sevika: Feminist Hindu, female, 49, social worker and activist

Contents

SESSION 1:

EIGHT DIVERSE HINDUS

Sevak: Greetings! Welcome to the seminar called "Hinduism for Today"! It is an experiment in the philosophy of Hindu thought and spirituality. It has been germinating in my mind for a number of years of which I have lost count. I am pleased and excited to see it taking shape in front of my eyes.

The idea was to gather eight committed but open-minded Hindus from diverse perspectives of life. They would talk their brains out to articulate a form of Hinduism suitable for this day and age. It should represent the Hindu tradition fairly. At the same time it should incorporate positive features that would help it last long to benefit Hindus and the entire humanity alike. Hinduism is a time-tested ancient way and view of life. It is inclusive, tolerant and friendly to other faiths of the world. It has even been described as a congregation of faiths. It has a lot to offer to the human civilization of which it is a goodly part itself. At the same time, Hinduism has a few things to learn from others. We are here to sort all this out.

It is gratifying to see four fine men and women who fill the bill. They are serious and ready to embark on a journey of deep thinking necessary for the task. I do not want sensation or drama. No throwing of temper tantrums to distract us. We, the eight as a group, want to engage in plain old serious thinking with a deep sense of responsibility. We have diversity, gender balance and a size that is neither too small nor too large. I hope we are ready to learn about Hinduism as we also want to contribute our knowledge and perspective on Hindu thought and life. Above all, we want to work as a cohesive team devoted to accomplish the task. Are we there?

All: Yes, Sevakji!

Sevak: Every one of you, please make yourself comfortable. We are in this for a while. We will be relaxed but decent. We won't be needlessly formal. In no case we want to be uptight. So, people, relax, take a deep breath and jump right in! Transform this event into a thoughtful and explorative experience of your lifetime. You are embarked on a journey to articulate the Hindu in you, express yourself in the seminar and communicate with other very different Hindus here. We will disagree but won't be disagreeable. We want to contribute our thought to all serious Hindus around the world who want to see a form of Hinduism

that will suit modern day Hindus and will contribute positively to all humanity in general.

For the time being, our action calls for hard thinking in the main. Of course, that is just a first serious step in the direction of translating it into an exemplary life of meaning and fulfillment. We want to feel called to be of use and benefit to all -- yes, really all -- humans throughout the world who want to see how Hinduism can provide an inspiring, productive and relevant vision to all aspiring humans. We want to start earnestly by doing all we can, beginning with contributing our best thoughts right here and now. Hope we are ready for this adventure of a thought experiment. Are we?

All: We are!

Sevak: Thanks a lot! I won't be so animated and passionate all the time. But I really want to see us all committed and fully energized. I would like each of you to be an individual true to yourself and at the same time willing to listen with an open mind.

Anish: Sevakji, I heard that, if you keep your mind wide open, people will throw all kinds of garbage in it!

Sevak: Anish, that is exactly why we should exercise our mind too. Thinking seriously for oneself is as necessary as listening with an open mind. This seminar is not intended to process or indoctrinate anyone. We do, however, expect that people will hear us out with diligence and make up their own mind after all.

Anish: I am all ears, Sevakji, and I am ready to speak my mind.

Sevak: That's great, Anish. So, folks, this is the first session of the seminar. I thank you for accepting my invitation to participate. You are a truly select group. It took a long time for me to decide whom to invite. I do expect a level of intellectual proclivity. As a retired professor of Sanskrit I was tempted to envisage high intellectual sophistication. But I resisted that temptation.

Hindus are not just Hindus; they are much more, in this fast moving global village in which we live these days. They pursue diverse careers and follow different paths of cultural life. I am glad to notice that the eight participants here represent these differences well. I have great

confidence that we have what it takes to eventuate a Hinduism for Today that will be really worthwhile.

Madhyama: Sevakji, if you wish, I will take care of the logistics of our sessions. That will allow you to focus on the substance of our proceedings.

Sevak: Thank you, Madhyama. I will be happy to trust you with the logistics.

Madhyama: How many sessions do you think it will take for us to achieve our goal of formulating a Hinduism for Today?

Sevak: I do not have even an approximate count. If you people do not mind, I would like us to flow freely, explore all relevant avenues and move at our own speed. At the end we want to be convinced that we got what we wanted. I do not have a predetermined format or result in which to fit us prematurely. Is this acceptable to everyone here?

All: Yes!

Sevak: You know how to please a professor! Thank you very much. Madhyama, how should we proceed with the current session?

Madhyama: Sevakji, why don't we start with a short round of self-introductions? A more detailed round of self-introductions will follow later.

Sevak: Good idea! In the first round participants will announce their names together with their chosen forms of greeting. You know we Hindus fold our palms and then utter the greeting, which takes various forms. I am sure each of us has a chosen form of greeting. Traditionally, our first names are Sanskrit and they carry meanings of their own. Take this occasion to explain both your name and the greeting you use. We will start exhibiting our diversity this way.

Madhyama: Awsome! I will put Sanskriti in charge of this round. She is our cultural rep! Will you do this for us, Sanskriti?

Sanskriti: Gladly, Madhyama. In case anyone can't explain the greeting, I will! Some Hindus mechanically say the greeting they have learned and won't know its full meaning! The same goes with their names too.

Don't be embarrassed! We all are going to learn a lot about Hinduism at this seminar. At least I am going to!

Darshana: I want to interject something here about names. Traditionally, Hindus name themselves – and I am talking about first names – from gods and goddesses of the Hindu pantheon or from the attributes and qualities of the gods and goddesses. These names are most usually in Sanskrit, our classical language in which most of our scriptures are written. It pains me to say that it has become a fashion these days to name children on the basis of nice sounding letters and syllables rather than the beautiful traditional style where every Sanskrit name has a good meaning. A name with good meaning continues to challenge its bearer for life to emulate and imbibe the meaning in his or her life. But with some of the names today that have no meanings at all, their bearers are *tabula rasa* or blank slates!

Sevak: Darshana, I appreciate you making a very pertinent point. You also stated it forcefully. Let us hope it goads the merely phonetic Hindus to include good semantics in the names they give their children.

Sanskriti: Meaningless names are threatening to become a fad. I want to thank Darshana for pointing out a silly modernism infecting the Hindu culture at this time.

Mahila: I am a feminist and have affinity for postmodernism. I roundly condemn this silly piece of modernism!

Madhyama: Let us go back and talk about the agenda. The next item in today's agenda is the second round of self-introductions. Sevakji, what form should these take?

Sevak: In this round I would like us to say what sort of Hindu each of us is, revealing one's self-image. But let us deal with this later. There is a third item in the agenda, which I like to sandwich between the two rounds of self-introductions. This item may be called the rationale behind the seminar, especially in terms of the nature of audience we have in mind.

Madhyama: Let me recount the three items of our agenda. First, we introduce ourselves announcing and explaining our names and greetings. Second, Sevakji will lead us on the nature of our audience. Third, we will talk about what kinds of Hindu we are. Is this clear, folks?

All: Yes!

Madhyama: Sanskriti will take care of the first round of self-introductions.

Sanskriti: Let us start with Sevakji.

Sevak: My name is Sevak, which means "servant." I would like to be counted among the servants of humanity. Hey, you folks know my favorite greeting, right?

All: "*Svagatam*," Sevakji.

Sevak: *Svagatam*, indeed. This greeting, "svagatam," simply means "welcome."

Sanskriti: Let me point out one thing about that greeting. I learned it years ago when I took Sevakji's Sanskrit class in college. Sevakji clarified in the class why the more popular form of this greeting, namely "*su-svagatam*," is incorrect.

Anish: Sanskriti, we hear the greeting "*su-svagatam*" all the time. Why is it incorrect?

Sanskriti: "*Su*" means "well" and "*agatam*" means "come." Hence, "*svagatam*" already means "welcome." So, "*su-svagatam*" would mean "well-well-come," which would be jarring, to say the least.

Anish: I got it. Thank you, Sanskriti.

Sanskriti: Who wants to go next?

Darshana: *Hari Om*, my name is Darshana. I am a rare woman who is a philosopher. My name means "vision of ultimate reality." In Sanskrit that term stands for philosophy. How appropriate!

Sevak: Darshana, when that term is used in feminine gender, it also means "beautiful."

Darshana: Sevakji, at my age I would like my philosophical thinking to be beautiful, that is, clear, cogent and credible. Would that satisfy you?

Sevak: Darshana, at my age I am supposed to exercise restraint and contenment! I will restrict myself to beautiful thinking and be content!
Darshana: I chose the greeting "*Hari Om.*" "*Hari*" is the name of God Vishnu, meaning "one who steals the heart." The greeting also includes the sacred syllable "*Om.*" *Om* is the original sound of cosmic creation. It also signifies a host of other esoteric meanings discussed at length in the Hindu texts called the Upanishads.

Sanskriti: Darshana has done an exemplary job, explaining her name and greeting. Who wants to follow her?

Mahila: *Jay Mata di*, I am Mahila. My name, Mahila, means "woman" or, rather, "lady." Identifying myself as a respectful woman is my cup of feminist tea. I am deeply interested in the well being of women. I have chosen a greeting that means, "Hail to the Mother Goddess." Isn't that appropriate, too?

Sanskriti: Sure, it is, Mahila. Thank you. Let me go now, myself, in the round of short self-introductions. I am Sanskriti. My name means, "culture." Or, "refinement." I am a woman involved up to her neck in cultural festivities. My greeting is "*Jay Shri Krishna*," which means, "Hail to Lord Krishna." I assume it is self-explanatory to Hindus, who know that Krishna is the eighth major incarnation of God Vishnu. Krishna was a full incarnation of God and he taught the most celebrated text of Hinduism, called the *Bhagavad-gita* or the Song of God.

Sevak: Excellent, Sanskriti. I will give you an "A" again!

Sanskriti: Thank you, Sevakji. I will wear your grade as a badge of honor, even if it is less than an "A".

Sevak: I think once I gave you a "B+", but nothing less than that. You were a bright student.

Sanskriti: That makes my day, Sevakji. Next, please.

Sanatan: I will go next. I am Sanatan. The name means that which is ancient, permanent or eternal. It fits a man of conservative thought like me. My chosen greeting is "*Namaskar*", which means "salutation." It is a very traditional greeting. I am happy to salute everyone I meet.

Anish: I will take my turn now. My chosen greeting is "*Namas-te*" which, I am told, means "greetings to you." It is simple, straightforward and respectful. I am known as someone who defies well-worn ideas like, for example, personal deity. My name, "Anish" means "one who is without God, the Ruler." The ruling God is a personal God and I have my doubts about that well-worn concept.

Sanatan: But, Anish, that "well-worn" concept means the world to me. It has meant and continues to mean that to millions of Hindus.

Anish: But, Sanatan, numbers by themselves, however large, do not impress me, even though I am a scientist by training and engineer by profession.

Sanatan: Fine, I look forward to discussing God with you substantially in the future meetings.

Anish: Same here. We meet as friends who agree to disagree.

Sanatan: True.

Sanskriti: Madhyama, do you want to go next?

Madhyama: Sure, my name is Madhyama. My name has more than one meaning. It means "one who goes in the middle." I am a woman who has worked as a conflict resolver, having a penchant to find the middle way in conflict situations.

Anish: Madhyama, what are some other meanings of your name?

Madhyama: One is the middle finger! Another is "medium speech" referring to third of the four stages of speech. Then it also means a girl who has just attained puberty. It also refers to a type of leading lady in poetics.

Anish: One who resolves conflicts by finding the middle way is good enough for me.

Madhyama: My chosen greeting is "*Pranam*" which means "respects" or "salutation." Nothing fancy there. Just middle of the way!

Navin: I am the last man left. My name is Navin, meaning "new". Fittingly, I am a man who prefers reforms, finding old ways to be not useful any more.

Sanatan: Between us, Navin, we will have a number of disagreements to work on.

Navin: Yes, I look forward to a dialog with you in the future sessions.

Madhyama: I will try to mediate between you two, one conservative and another reformist.

Sanskriti: Navin, what is your chosen form of greeting?

Navin: It's "*Vandan*," which, like "*Pranam*," means respectful salutation. It shows humility.

Sevak: We have an array of diverse greetings here. Together, they illustrate the diversity, if not complexity, of Hinduism.

Darshana: Hopefully, we will not conflate true diversity and complexity, reducing them to a phony and murky simplicity.

Mahila: I hope that we will not revel and wallow in diversity and complexity for their own sake.

Sevak: Maybe, as Einstein used to say, we should make things as simple as possible, but not less!

Darshana: His favorite example of needless complexity was income tax.

Sanskriti: Not many will disagree with that. I hire a bunch of tax experts to sort out my finances.

Anish: I cannot afford even one tax advisor. Well, I take it back. My ego keeps me from hiring one. I work hard at my tax return every year. I am an accomplished mathematician and am supposed to be good at numbers!

Sevak: I do not know about you but I like it that each of us is greeted at the outset in so many different ways. How do you feel about it?

All: Good, Sevakji!

Madhyama: It makes us feel variously welcome!

Sevak: Welcome to Hindus and to Hinduism! We have our work cut out for us. We will see that it is challenging and it will try us in many different ways. Hope we will persevere to the end and accomplish our goal of finding a good Hinduism for Today.

All: We will!

Madhyama: That makes us feel variously welcome!

Sevak: Again, heartiest welcome to you all! Once more I wish to thank you for accepting my invitation to this seminar on "Hinduism for Today." I do not plan to be a teacher, much less a preacher, unless you provoke me to! Please regard me as a facilitator of this seminar. I am glad to count each of you as a good friend. All of you are younger than me, so I cannot ask you to drop the honorific "--ji" and call me just Sevak. But feel free to call me Sevak, if you are more comfortable doing that.

Madhyama: It is nice of you to invite us and even nicer to let us call you Sevak, but we feel pretty good calling you Sevakji, if you don't mind. For, you also know more about Hinduism and related areas than any of us. We are here not just to talk about Hinduism but also to learn about it from you and, hopefully, from everyone here.

Sevak: My knowledge of Hinduism is more conceptual than experiential. As you know, the goal of this seminar is to review Hinduism and produce an adjusted version for this time and day. Please note a few ground rules. Steer clear of politics relating to Hinduism. Minimize, at this stage, using Sanskrit words or other technical terms. Later, we will relax this rule as we enter deeper waters. Seek to dwell on general matters at this point so that what you say is relevant, interesting and, hopefully, significant for anyone with a more than casual interest in Hinduism. Above all, respect all and consider their views with care. We want to know more about each other here. So, ask questions, if you will, to elicit more information about anyone's and everyone's approach to Hinduism. I look forward to learning from every one of you. Whatever name we want to call the Divinity by, its full flame warms everybody's heart and I must glean wisdom from that light in each of you.

Anish: Not so fast, Sevakji. All others here may accept the existence of Divinity inside or outside their hearts. But I have difficulty doing that. I believe there is humanity in every heart and it is our best hope.
Navin: Anish, I have known you as a well-meaning atheist with a humanitarian heart. A broadly conceived Hinduism has room for you.

Anish: Navin, because I can find enough Hindus like you to welcome me in their fold, I don't feel alienated from the Hindu community.

Sevak: Anish, you are definitely welcome. I feel the Hindu concept of Divinity is broad enough to accommodate people with large heart like you.

Madhyama: Sevakji, what in general would you want to say regarding our intended audience?

Sevak: Good question, Madhyama. It will help us clarify whom we are addressing as the eventual audience of our seminar. The rationale for having this seminar has multiple dimensions. It is addressed to Hindus and Hinduism in the sense that many Hindus have currently come to feel themselves proud of Hinduism but feel a need to know more about Hinduism. They want to be clear about what it is that they are proud of as far as Hinduism is concerned.

Anish: Sevakji, there are things in Hinduism that we may not want to be proud of. Is it appropriate to say this or is it too impolitic in this group?

Sevak: Anish, it is entirely appropriate to say that. In fact it is not possible to be proud of everything in Hinduism for any thoughtful Hindu who has a good conscience.

Sanatan: Sevakji, I will agree with that with the caveat that I won't find too many things that I am not proud of in Hinduism. Yet, I agree that no conscientious Hindu can be proud of everything that goes on in the name of Hindu *dharma* or righteousness. At the same time, pressure has been laid on Hindus to make them feel less than proud of their religion and I won't submit to that.

Sanskriti: I support Sanatan on this. For various reasons in history Hindus have been made to feel that their religion is some how inferior to other religions of the world. But I agree that we need to talk about the points where Hinduism is both similar to and different from other faiths.

We need both good knowledge and thoughtful comparison to tell us what we should be proud of from what we should not be proud of about being Hindus.

Sevak: I am glad to notice that we are not dogmatic devotees of Hinduism here. Mere fanaticism or blind worship is not our cup of tea. We won't be afraid even to wash our dirty linen in public. But we assert our right to narrate a positive account of Hinduism that is still fit and useful for this day and age so that we can call it Hinduism for Today. We will attempt to show how our Hinduism for Today is both rational and responsible.

If we find something in other faiths that is vital, relevant and beneficial, we won't hesitate to include it in our Hinduism for Today. So, our audience is not just Hindus and Hinduism but other faiths that have something good to offer that Hinduism can adopt or adapt.

Our audience, further, includes styles and philosophies of life that are not traditionally religious. They may be secular but may have a good measure of humanitarianism in them. We should listen to them and be willing to utilize the good in them to incorporate it in our Hinduism for Today.

The upshot is that we want to be relevant, useful and interesting to all Hindus, people of other faiths and people of secular humanist orientation by specifically and clearly dwelling on points of wide human, religious and spiritual interest in our articulation of Hinduism for Today. Hence, we will not focus our active consideration on matters that are only of local, ethnic or historical interest. We will deliberately focus on points that are of general and deep interest for the humanity as a whole at this time of world history and are likely to remain so in foreseeable future.

A few examples will make clear this point about matters of wide and deep interest and focusing on them. Human relationships in society, ultimate nature of reality for human purposes, paths of spiritual discipline, restrictive impact of doctrinal structure on human development are some of the clear examples. Staying on such topics will not only hold interest of all thoughtful humans worldwide; it will reassure them that Hinduism for Today does not neglect them. Hinduism for Today should be able to show that it has something significant to offer to humanity at large, which can be useful, relevant and constructive. In brief, our audience is not just all thoughtful Hindus, but it comprises all who want to participate in positive and constructive thinking for the humanity at large. For, it is hard to think that a form of Hinduism that does not speak to human needs in general can have a

lasting good in it even for Hindus as members of the worldwide community today.

Anish: Sevakji, I am thrilled that this group will focus on matters of vital human concerns and that its interest is far from just an ethnic one. Given this, we will be discussing subjects of deep human interest within Hinduism, within other faiths and within general humanist concerns worldwide.

Sanatan: I agree that our concern should range deep and wide to cover humanity as a whole. But let me submit that, after all said and done, we are Hindus and, therefore, our Hindu background in terms of life and culture will not remain distorted or hidden but will show itself at all stages of our deliberations.

Sanskriti: True, we do not have to nor do we want to hide our Hindu sensibilities in the process. We won't try to conceal even our individualities for that matter. For instance, I am aesthetically oriented and have accomplishments in classical Indian dance. I will bring that out when it is relevant in our dialogs.

Darshana: Hindus are not the only ones who would have interest in our deliberations. Hindus form a large chunk of humanity, not just in India, but also in worldwide Diaspora of the Hindu community. There is, for that reason, general interest in what Hindus have to say about matters of human life, culture and spirituality that we will be engaged in. We will be speaking to that area of interest, engaging all thoughtful men and women on the planet earth as we conduct a discourse about human condition and its diagnosis in the deeply human and philosophical aspects of the Hindu view.

Madhyama: It seems to me that Darshana has nicely embellished the issue about our audience that Sevakji has been addressing. In this way, we have achieved the narration of the second item in our agenda for today. Sevakji, is it not time to know each other a little better, letting everyone self-introduce at some length? I would like to know how everybody here relates with Hinduism.

Sanatan: Before we go on to that, may I interject something about the word "today" in our pursuit of a Hinduism for Today?
Sevak: Surely, Sanatan.

Sanatan: In my thinking, there is a tinge of eternity in the word "today" in our context. Ten, twenty or fifty years from now, Hinduism for Today should still be Hinduism for that day. So, am I wrong in thinking that we are not looking for a Hinduism that is sensible only for today or just the near future but something of a lasting value?

Sevak: Sanatan, you have hit the nail on the head. We certainly should be thinking toward Hinduism with a lasting value and not toward a nice dress for it that looks fashionable for the time being. Thank you for a well-thought conservative input. Now, it's time for the third item in our agenda. Thank you, Madhyama, for keeping us on track of the agenda. I believe all of us are committed Hindus. But the group reflects diverse orientations from which we approach life and, indeed, Hinduism. This speaks for the largeness of the Hindu heart that can give space to such enormous diversity. Together, we represent a cross-section of Hinduism that is wide enough for us to engage in an intense and fruitful dialog. By no means do we exhaust the Hindu diversity, for we also are not too large a group to keep us from effective discussion.

Let me ask each of you to briefly introduce yourself in relation to Hinduism. Everyone else should feel free to ask questions to know more of any one introducing oneself at this stage. But keep in mind that, as we go on with our dialog in future sessions, we will know more of everybody here any way.

Sanatan: Can I begin the self-introductions? From the way I am dressed you may have guessed that I am very strongly committed to Hinduism. I feel that the writings of the ancient sages in our past contain nearly infallible wisdom, which we should all imbibe. It cannot but benefit us spiritually and otherwise too.

Sevak: Forgive the interruption, Sanatan. Just a word about what makes a sage in Hinduism. The concept of a *rishi* or sage includes only those dedicated individuals who have devoted their life to delving deep into their minds with a view to finding the most rewarding reality within and applying their finding full time in public service. The title of sage has to be earned the hard way. It is not just claimed and is not lightly conferred. Traditionally, a sage adopts a very simple lifestyle, living in a forest hut, voluntarily reducing his or her physical needs to a bare minimum. Sages impose strict discipline on themselves to gain their objective of knowledge and service. They are full of compassion for all living beings and teach the community without looking for any personal reward.

Sanatan, I just wanted to expand on the concept of sage that you introduced. Can you say what kind of Hindu you would call yourself? Please restrict yourself to just one adjective in describing the sort of Hindu you think you are.

Madhyama: Everybody, please, think of just one qualifier as your turn comes up to identify yourself as the type of Hindu you are.

Sanatan: Sevakji, if I have to choose just one word to describe my commitment to Hinduism, I would call myself a conservative Hindu.

Sanskriti: Sanatan, would you care to call yourself a fundamentalist Hindu in the same vein that you call yourself a conservative Hindu? I have heard the word "fundamentalist" bandied around very often, mostly in a pejorative way. I want to learn about how you feel in regard to it.

Sanatan: That is an excellent question, Sanskriti. In fact, I looked up the word "fundamentalism" and ran a little research on it just my way. In general, fundamentalism involves a narrow focus on selected scriptural texts with an insistence on literal meaning with a view to excluding those who do not agree with the texts as interpreted. It seems to me that Hinduism does not easily allow one to do this to reach apodeictic propositions that arbitrarily exclude nonbelievers and cast them in a negative light. Some of my friends manage to do this, however, so I cannot say that Hinduism never exhibits a culpably narrow type of fundamentalism. But the high degree of tolerance of diverse approaches in Hinduism does work as a serious obstacle to overcome for anyone who wants to entertain an extreme form of fundamentalist Hinduism.

Mahila: Sanatan, I hope this will not be an untoward digression, but can you say a few words on militant Hinduism from your perspective?

Sanatan: I like the civility of the way in which you frame the question, Mahila. Quite frequently, I have been asked this question in a less civilized manner. I do not approve of militancy in Hinduism or any other religion, especially if it leads to hateful violence. I have known some militant Hindus. I understand them but I do not empathize with their venom.

Navin: That's a good way of putting it, Sanatan. I would like to know what it is in them that you understand and why.

Sanatan: Navin, what I mean by saying that I understand them is this. I have found that almost always a militant Hindu has had a devastating or at least terribly disturbing personal experience to which the militancy is a reaction. Someone in their life has been personally abused, even roughed up, leading them to their present reactive anger. In this situation I would personally regard their anger as understandable. For, this anger is not a product of some Hindu doctrine but a human reaction to unprovoked violence. Their wrath is what I'd say I understand. It is very human. However, it is unfortunate that they would not control their anger. Rage is not recommended in any Hindu texts that I know, looking at the broad spectrum of authentic Hindu literature. To tell the truth, complete forgiveness is recommended as a great virtue for anyone who wants to cultivate the highest spiritual end of life.

Sevak: This is revealing especially as it comes from one who wants to call himself a conservative Hindu. Sanatan, what do you regard to be conservative in your approach to Hinduism?

Sanatan: Importantly, my conservatism begins at home. I believe that I must accept my station in life as I find myself in. The cards are dealt to me in this life. They are of my own making. I created this destiny of mine by my own deeds in this life or past lives. I must harmonize with my social surroundings and serve the community around me as best as I can in a spirit of sacrifice. My own base inclinations are the challenge and obstacle that I should overcome. My conservatism basically consists in accepting my situation with a smile on my face even when the situation is painful and limiting.

Anish: This is something I did not expect to find in a conservative Hindu. My hasty concept of conservatism in Hinduism was formed around someone who I was told would want to impose limiting and unwanted restrictions on others in the name of ancient scripture.

Sanatan: As a true conservative Hindu, I would have no right to ask anyone else to accept restrictions on their life if I have not shown in my own life a committed acceptance of restrictions. Again, I cannot say that I would not wish that everyone would follow the obligations of their situations. But, essentially, I must first put my own house in order and then let others draw lessons from it for themselves. Hopefully, those lessons will be of a conservative kind. Hinduism of my conservative approach does not wish anyone any ill of any kind. Yes, it does not allow anyone to indulge one's base inclinations in the name of freedom -

a word that is utterly abused and recklessly bandied about - but it must incline every conservative Hindu to exemplify in one's own life a cheerful observance of one's situational duties in the first place.
For instance, if I marry and my wife becomes crippled because of a car accident, my situation, and my Hindu orthodoxy, demands that I stand by her for the rest of my life and not leave her to pursue my own interests. In any case, an oppressive power-monger is definitely not my idea of a conservative Hindu. Incidentally, I draw inspiration from and am greatly influenced by Jaydayal Goyandka who was a prolific Hindi writer on Hinduism.

Sevak: I greatly appreciate Sanatan's self-introduction. We all stand to learn from his brand of conservatism and look forward to a beneficial exchange of ideas as we enter a lively dialog to occur later on. Let's move on. Who wants to do the next self-introduction?

Navin: I would call myself a reform Hindu . . .

Mahila: Wouldn't this make for a lively contrast with Sanatan, a conservative Hindu? Oh, I didn't mean to interrupt you, Navin.

Navin: No problem. Mahila, I am glad that you put it guardedly as a question and not as an assertion. Certainly I am committed to reform Hinduism. But the reform of my conception and its consequent plan of action are drawn from Mahatma Gandhi's thought and example. You all may recall that Gandhi drove conservative Hindus crazy by insisting that he was a "sanatani", that is, a conservative Hindu himself.

Sanatan: I have my differences with Gandhi, of course, as you would expect from a conservative Hindu. However, at this point, I would like Navin to elaborate on how he relates with Hinduism. I would like to know, particularly, what keeps him within the folds of Hinduism as he seeks reform.

Navin: A good question, Sanatan. Let me address it in relation to what you presented as a key point in your conservative Hinduism. You emphasized the role of situational duties of an individual. I would agree with it . . .

Sanatan: What a surprise! I wouldn't dream of you agreeing with me on that, given Gandhi's opposition to the traditional structure of vocations in the Hindu society, variously and endlessly castigated as "caste system"

by sundry detractors. If Gandhi would accept the structure, his claim to conservatism would have legs.

Navin: Not so fast, Sanatan. Let me describe briefly how, in the Gandhian vein, I would characterize my support of the Hindu vocational structure and then let you draw your conclusions. I do not have to agree with Gandhi on everything, but his approach to the structure is nothing less than intriguing and truly reformist.

Sevak: I am sure this is interesting and is not a serious digression. I'd urge, however, that we keep our self-introductions within limits so that we can finish this round of introductions before the session's end.

Mahila: All this is deeply engrossing, and not just interesting. I can't wait for Navin's Gandhian approach to the Hindu class structure.

Navin: I will be brief, knowing that I will have an opportunity later to elaborate. We surely will have more sessions, wouldn't we?

Sevak: The way things are going, we surely will have as many sessions as we want and need. Go ahead, Navin.

Navin: Any way, I will bring this back to my self-introduction with which it relates intimately. In Gandhi's view, with which I agree, every individual should accept the obligations of one's class. But this should come with a firm understanding that no one who is performing a socially needed and useful function is higher or lower than anyone else that is performing a different function, which, however, is also needed and useful. With this stroke, Gandhi sets the Hindu society in the direction of equality while preserving the self-sacrificial nature of the Hindu class structure.

Mahila: I find this intriguing and moving, because it equally applies to everybody in the society. So, everyone will be drawing the same salary, I suppose? And, how voluntary would this obligation be?

Navin: Yes, everyone will be drawing the same remuneration. Acceptance of the structure can never be imposed on any individual against his or her will. But what is intriguing to me is that this helps me preserve my reform-mindedness and yet firmly align myself with the genius of the self-sacrificing and socially harmonizing nature of the

Hindu vocational structure and make it work selflessly for the good of the community as a whole.

Sevak: Thank you very much, Navin, for a very thoughtful self-introduction. We look forward to learning more from you as we continue our dialog. For the present, we move on. Who will be the next self-introducer?

Madhyama: It's time for a woman to get in. I find Sanatan's approach to conservatism truly Hindu and Navin's approach to reform equally Hindu. And both shine in the positive tradition of the Hindu spirit. It is so promising and heartening that I need to reconcile just a minimal conflict in my pursuit of the middle way. After such a wonderful introduction to both conservatism and reform, it is also timely that a Hindu middle way should emerge. Let me call myself a moderate Hindu.

Darshana: Madhyama, moderation may be a desirable trait in non-philosophical contexts. But my philosophical mind is challenged if useful distinctions are blurred.

Madhyama: Thank you for a civil way of putting it, Darshana. I try to avoid wishy-washy thinking myself, although I admit I sacrifice rigor when pressed to resolve a sharp conflict. Maybe my priorities are a bit different from yours.

Darshana: I do not mean to distract you from your self-introduction. Never mind my interest in rigor, Madhyama. Please go ahead.

Madhyama: Very often the middle way is the way of integration and balance. I believe that the complex and elaborate structure of the Hindu thought that the ancient sages have erected has as its root intention a desire to have a society where each individual obtains the primary four goals of life with minimal conflict with others.

Sanskriti: I suppose you are referring to the four objects of human effort in Hinduism. I am jumping into this because I am involved in the so-called lower three objects. I am young and far away from the highest object which is the spiritual goal.

Madhyama: You are right, Sanskriti. Just the other day, I criticized the younger generation for listening to noisy music. I guess that makes me middle aged! It frightens me that I am no longer "young" like you.

Darshana: I am old enough to pursue the final spiritual goal. But I am not quite ready for it either.

Madhyama: I love Hinduism for it allows all this, being a great reconciler itself. The vocational structure of Hinduism, for example, should be approached in the spirit of integrating the society into a harmonious organism with interlocking elements that cause minimal conflict. To the extent the structure promotes social good in a harmonious manner it should be kept. To the extent it hinders the public good it should be changed. In short, I am not for preserving the old for the sake of preserving it and I am not for changing it just for the sake of changing it.

Darshana: I agree that Hinduism is not a blind alley like change for the sake of change and conservation just for the sake of conservation. There is always deeper thought behind its integrating and balancing act.

Mahila: But I would like to see how Madhyama would approach the four goals from her moderate viewpoint.

Madhyama: As an example, the vocational structure provides a very useful security blanket. The way it has evolved, every group has solidarity. It comes together at important events like weddings and funerals, drawing people belonging to the group from places that are scattered far away from the place of event. Members of the group look after each other and support them when support is needed. There is no need to destroy this positive aspect in the zeal for change. However, the positive aspect should not blind us to the need for changing the negative aspect where one group seeks to exploit or oppress another or otherwise treat it unjustly. If I have to make a slogan of moderate Hinduism, I would put it this way: remove the negatives, preserve the positives.

Darshana: The thought is attractive. My concern will relate to how exactly we would identify and distinguish positives and negatives. But I suppose we will have time to pursue this in some detail later on.

Sevak: Just one question, Madhyama, before we move to the next self-introducer. How would you describe your moderation in relation to Sanatan's conservatism and Navin's reform?

Madhyama: Let me try this. I understand that conservative Hinduism is committed to preserving the tradition and resists any erosion of the

integrity of the tradition. Reform Hinduism, on the other hand, is committed to reforming the tradition and fights the forces that resist change. Moderate Hinduism, as I see it, will say that let us not fix what is not broken but let us also not drag our feet when something is broken and needs fixing.

Sevak: You have made a thoughtful distinction. I am sure we will have time later to pursue it in greater detail. Thank you, Madhyama, for articulating a moderate Hinduism that steers a middle course between conservatism and reform. We look forward to learning from you more as we enter thicker woods. How about proceeding further to the next self-introduction?

Sanskriti: I am ready to take my turn. I am perhaps not as intense in my commitment to Hinduism as Sanatan, Navin and Madhyama. But I am deeply engrossed in the culture of Hinduism. Both dance and music fascinate me, not to speak of literature in which I am beginning to go deeper. I am active in performing but I am also busy directing and organizing cultural events. I enjoy people and love associating with a wide range of artists and authors.
In the course of my cultural activities I have picked up a great deal of what the Hindu spirit stands for. As you may guess, I am more intuitive than intellectual. But I greatly enjoy what I am doing. I feel that Hinduism stands for fully living one's life and exploring all avenues of fulfillment that life offers. Sevakji has asked us to limit each to one adjective for their relationship with Hinduism. I would say I am a cultural Hindu.

Anish: Sanskriti, I spend a lot of time doubting, challenging and questioning a lot of well-worn ideas that people hurl at me. I cannot seem to do that to what you said. But do you ever question the Hindu forms you experience through your cultural exposure?

Sanskriti: Frankly speaking, no. It may be because these forms are aesthetic. Anish, when I experience classical vocal music from an accomplished artist, for example, the joy goes through my heart and appreciation is so deep that questioning it does not occur to me. Questioning it would be like questioning my own existence. I have heard that aesthetic enjoyment is akin to spiritual experience. I relate with that. When I get to cultivate spirituality at a later stage in my life, I will look for even deeper enjoyment compared to the aesthetic appreciation I enjoy so much.

I believe and hope that the spiritual will turn out to be a deeper dimension of the aesthetic. In that sense I will progress toward spiritual in a gradual manner but without a meticulous plan. I am into spontaneity and restrict my planning to my event organizing activities. To relate with Anish's view, I may say that I enjoy culture and art as much as Anish enjoys questioning. Just as he does not question his questioning, I do not question my aesthetic involvement.

Anish: Sanskriti just gave me good food for thought.

Mahila: Sanskriti, would you elaborate on how your cultural involvement relates to Hinduism?

Sanskriti: I'd say my life is my being a Hindu. Or, my being a Hindu is the way I live my life. If you are looking for beliefs and doctrines, I may not be intellectual enough to describe them very precisely. Let me try, however. Hindus project obtaining rounded fulfillment in life through reaching four very diverse goals. One of these includes instinctive, natural and immediate values, which are more spontaneous than learned from the society. At the lower level they are food and sex; at the higher level they are art and literature. I am into all of these but I enjoy art more deeply. The second goal, as most of you here know, is realizing social and economic values. Again, at the lower level it means acquiring and growing wealth and at the higher level it is acquiring good name through leadership and philanthropic activities. I am into all of these but enjoy event organizing more. The third goal I see to be being honest and giving in one's approach to one's fellow beings that you come in contact with.

I deal with people honestly and respect everybody that I happen to work with. I help people. Doing that, sometimes I get taken advantage of. But I do not dwell on it; rather, I resolve not do it to others, for it does not feel good to me. I never strike back out of spite, although many say that I would be justified in doing so in some outstanding cases. Thus, I am into three of the four goals. Yes, I am not in the final goal of pursuing a spiritual path. But I am in the middle of the second stage of life. I am in no hurry to jump into the fourth stage of life. I, therefore, feel that I am being a Hindu in what I am doing.

Sevak: Sorry for the interruption, Sanskriti. But I need to put in a word regarding the four stages in Hinduism that you mentioned. The Sanskrit word for a stage of life is "ashrama". The first stage in life involves being a student. The second stage is that of a householder. In the third

stage a person becomes semi-retired and volunteers one's knowledge and experience to serve public good. In the fourth and final stage a person devotes oneself full time to his or her chosen spiritual path. Sanskriti, you can go ahead now. But I see Mahila raising her hand.

Mahila: Would you say, Sanskriti, that you would be a cultural Hindu if you would be in art but not in the Hindu manifestations of art?

Sanskriti: What a sharp question! Great! I never thought of it before. It is true that I feel at home when I am doing Bharata-natyam, which is obviously a Hindu manifestation of the dance form. But, given my description of the four goals, would I be a Hindu if I were to equally enjoy ballet, for example? My intuition tells me that I would be a sort of a Hindu still but not a cultural Hindu at that point. But, why bother? I just enjoy being a cultural Hindu and that seems good enough for me at this point in my life. I want to add that Rukmini Devi's thought and work has wielded major influence on me. I admire her outstanding work for classical Indian dance. But I confess I am not in teaching of art like her.

Sevak: I appreciate a lively articulation of your being a cultural Hindu, Sanskriti. We expect to learn from your intuition as we go on. Yes, we need the next self-introducer.

Mahila: I am a feminist Hindu. I have ruffled many a feather with my feminist thinking and activities. As a feminist I was always concerned with what I'd call concrete ethics. Feminism with political and ideological agenda never attracted me. I am not into carving out a new morality, a new objectivity, a new metaphysic, a new logic, a new science, a new way of living or thinking on behalf of women of my vision, in conscious opposition to patriarchy. But I fought fiercely when I saw women treated unfairly. I am still very sensitive to any oppression or exploitation of women. However, the intensity of my ethical concern for women has abated as I found myself transformed spiritually by a woman saint and her life. So, my present and deepest source of inspiration is Mira.

Madhyama: Wow! With an inspirer like Mira, you are firmly in the folds of Hinduism. So, it would be senseless to ask what makes you a Hindu. But, Mahila, would you tell us more about what transformed you and why you continue to consider yourself a feminist?

Mahila: Madhyama, that's a pointed observation and a pointed question. To cut a long story short, let me point out that Mira was a rebel and I, or any feminist for that matter, is also a rebel. Mira transformed the ethical feminist in me into a spiritual feminist. I guess this worked because I was not a feminist ideologue. Maybe I was vulnerable but I don't think I was or am gullible. I have seen too much of life to be gullible. Sure, I recognize that hard-core feminist ideologues are wont to accuse me of gullibility. My femininity is not for sale. You cannot buy it with any ideological promises. It goes where it wants to. I am fiercely individualistic. Just like Mira.

Darshana: I am quite interested to know about what you call spiritual feminism. Do you find that Mira was a spiritual feminist?

Mahila: Mira was a spiritual feminist, to be sharply distinguished from a political feminist who seeks power as a remedy for women's ills. A spiritual feminist like Mira surrenders one's masculinity to the only man there is: Krishna. Jung talks about animus and anima, showing that every man or woman has both masculinity and femininity and the ideal is to balance the two. Mira's ideal is to merge the masculinity in Krishna and retain the full femininity for oneself. The co-equal union between the full masculinity of Krishna and the full femininity of the devotee then leads to infinite enlightened bliss, which is the goal of spiritual life.

Anish: This is certainly interesting for women but where does it leave men?

Mahila: Anish, I'm afraid Mira's path is quite a lot more challenging to men than to women.

Anish: I can't wait. Usually I am the one who challenges people. I guess it is my turn to be challenged.

Mahila: An average woman, Mira would say, has more femininity than masculinity. Let us not go into the irresolvable question whether this is because of nature or nurture or both. Regardless, this excess of femininity over masculinity makes it relatively easier for her to shed the masculinity and retain femininity. But an average man, again because of nature, nurture or both, has a lot more masculinity than femininity. So, he is truly challenged to surrender his masculinity and develop femininity to merge with Krishna's masculinity.

Anish: Truly challenging, indeed. I am flabbergasted. I realize my male ego would resist this with all its strength.

Mahila: Not to speak of its capacity to invent many a reason not to surrender itself.

Anish: Seems only way I can counter this is by inventing a form of spiritual masculinism but it would sound like an oxymoron and would not work or just look self-serving. On the other hand, to challenge Krishna is to challenge one's own source, as a man, you will say, always derives his masculinity from Krishna.

Mahila: I didn't mean to trap you. But there are examples of men who have done this and been there, with great success.

Anish: Like whom?

Mahila: A Gujarati saint-poet called Narsinh Mehta. The Bengali mystic Ramakrishna Paramahans when he practiced a spiritual path called "sakhi sampradaya," which means the path of the female friend. A man following and practicing the sakhi path of spirituality has to transform himself into a female friend of God and relate with God with a friend's love. From Mira's point of view, even Jesus can be seen as a spiritual feminist whose love for God made him to surrender his masculine ego to his Father.

Anish: I need time to digest this. There is much innovative thinking here.

Mahila: What makes this spiritual, however, is the full concrete experience that engrossed Mira. Mira's poetry is quite a testimony to her experience.

Sanskriti: I can vouch for that. Her poetry is profoundly engrossing and takes the reader deep into a spiritual fold. That is why Mira's songs are a fixture in many a religious cultural event. They are the favorite of both men and women.

Sevak: Would you say, Mahila, that without seeking to start a mass following, Mira succeeded in launching a radical feminism of spiritual genre by asking for a spiritual transformation of men into women?

Mahila: Seems quite well put, Sevakji. I am done, unless someone has questions.

Sevak: Looks like we are ready for the next self-introduction.

Anish: I want to call myself an atheistic Hindu . . .

Sanatan: I feel a bit uncomfortable about joining Hinduism to atheism. But, I'm sorry for the interruption. Please go ahead. I should think there is something to learn here.

Anish: My atheism won't sit well with mainline Hinduism, which seems to me to be thinking that it is totally identical with all the Hinduism there is or even was. I like to question the establishment. I do that not just for the kicks of it or for the sense of adventure and a youthful getting away with it. Maybe I will season with age and in my third or fourth stage of life I will get the mainline religion. But, until then, I am what I am, trying to learn by questioning.

The *Upanishads*, our ancient authoritative texts on philosophy and spirituality, support questioning. They recommend, for example, that one should obtain the deepest self by first hearing about it, then by examining it and finally by meditating on it. My questioning is a part of the second means of examining the self. I am engaged in examining the collective self of Hinduism. Two women have set up glorious example of questioning authority in face of attempts at silencing them.

Mahila: Whom are you referring to, Anish?

Anish: Mahila, I am referring to Gargi in the Upanishads, who asked questions after questions to her husband, the sage Yajnavalkya. It is unfortunate that Yajnavalkya asked her to stop questioning, saying that her head would split if she questioned too much. But what is "too much questioning," who draws the line and how is it to be drawn? The other one is Draupadi, the fire-breathing leading lady of the war epic *Mahabharata*. In an open assembly of elder males she asked the highest establishment of the time whether she was being treated unfairly. She embarrassed the establishment, which lost its face in face of her sharp questioning.

Madhyama: Anish, her unfair treatment was ended by Krishna, though, the God incarnate. And you want to deny God if you are true to your atheism.

Anish: Krishna certainly intervened in a timely fashion, but he too did not provide answers to her questions. The God of my possible faith would be a perfect example of ethics beyond reproach. Only Rama and Mahatma Gandhi come close to this ideal.

Darshana: Anish, how do you ground your ethics, which, it appears, you are using almost as a replacement of God?

Anish: My ethics is self-grounding in the human nature itself. The human heart is capable of determining what is fair and what is not fair. Appeal to the authority of God can only silence a questioning of the establishment. If it is not ultimately grounded in human conscience, it will fail to convince. Silencing is not convincing. But, wait a minute; I can cite scripture to support atheism.

Sanatan: Anish, I would like to know what scriptural texts support atheism.

Anish: Sanatan, you may, however, interpret those texts differently. Of course, there is the famous *Nasadiya* hymn of the *Rig-veda*. It shows many possibilities for the origin of the world and many of them are abstract principles rather than a personal God. Then there is the famous skeptical hymn asking which God should we worship with our offering. Out of the six traditional systems of Hindu philosophy, *Sankhya* famously did not have God, although one had to be added later because of the theist pressure. Similar is the case of Patanjali's *Yoga-sutra,* which has no creator God. *Mimamsa* has a host of gods but they are instruments of sacrificial ritual and even together do not amount to an authority figure of a creator of the world. Sankhya influenced the Buddha and as we know very well, the Buddha was not a theist. Also let us remember that the Buddha is the ninth incarnation of God in Hinduism. He is also a full and not a partial incarnation. I do not know how to use an incarnation of God that fails to assert the existence of God. In any case, it does not make for a consistent affirmation of theism.
To cap all this, in the third chapter, verse 20 of the *Bhagavad-gita* Krishna states very clearly that Janaka and others attained the highest state of spirituality by actions alone, that is, without a need for God. Thus, I would suggest that there is enough support in the Hindu texts to indicate that the highest goal of spiritual path can be attained by a life of ethical actions alone. In other words, *karma-yoga* or the path of selfless public service is sufficient for one to attain final liberation. One example of such a life would be Jawaharlal Nehru who did not assert belief in

God and yet was an exemplary person for a totally dedicated life of public service. Mahatma Gandhi got along with him very well and had no problems working with him. So, this in brief is my plea for my atheistic Hinduism. By the way, this does not endorse any of the controversial political decisions made by Nehru.

Sanatan: Anish, I must say you have given me some food for thought. I would still submit that the overwhelming textual substance of Hindu literature is theistic in nature, making it odd for a mainstream Hindu to profess atheism. The Hindu literature is very vast indeed, encompassing hundreds of authors who wrote over thousands of years. That makes it possible to find segments supporting almost any kind of belief, including atheism. Nevertheless, especially in light of the chapter and verse you referred to in the Gita, it is difficult to say that belief in God is a necessary prerequisite for reaching the highest spiritual goal. I would, however, like to defer a deeper and more comprehensive discussion of this entire topic at a later time when we will have covered a good deal of ancillary material as a preparation for a deeper discourse.

Sevak: Looking at your faces it seems as if everybody concurs in deferring this topic for a later moment. I want to thank Anish for a provocative and challenging viewpoint. I am sure we will learn even more from a future furtherance of the matter. I suppose now Darshana is the final self-introducer we have left.

Darshana: Like a typical philosopher, I struggled in my mind to decide if I should call myself thinking Hindu or a philosophical Hindu. Finally I settled on being a philosophical Hindu even though the difference in supporting reasons for both was not significant. I have studied philosophy and have spent a good measure of my life thinking about issues that I found challenging. I think that Hindu philosophy centers on the issues of the nature of self. Even the non-Hindu philosophies that separated from the Hindu mother-fold, such as Buddhism and Jainism, had to deal with this issue in their own way. The intellectual proliferation of Buddhist philosophies had in common not even the nature of *nirvana* or the meaning of being the Buddha. For, they differed on both these important topics. But they all agreed in opposing the Hindu insistence that there is a self. So, interestingly, the Hindu concern with self became a defining issue for the umpteen varieties of Buddhist philosophy.

The six systems of traditional Hindu philosophy advance different concepts of self. The idea is that self is not what it seems to be on the

surface. The real self is hidden and has to be discovered. Once you discover and decide on its true nature, you know that the next step is to realize it fully and attain an identity with it or achieve its full potential. The most celebrated concept of self in Hinduism is, of course, the Upanishadic one, which identifies the deepest self in the human individual with the essence of the cosmic self. The non-duality of the two is regarded as the distinct contribution of Hinduism to the history of mystical philosophy in the world. You have a clear claim to being a Hindu if you accept this non-duality. It stands out from most, if not all, other philosophies in the world history. I myself find it very attractive and identify with it on an intuitive basis quite often.

But I am led to doubt it too on occasions when my reason gets the better part of my identity. Generally, it is thought that the non-duality of the individual and cosmic selves has solid logical underpinnings. This is mainly due to Adi Shankaracharya, its prime exponent, who enjoys a very high reputation for impeccable logic. I do not stay in a perpetual state of questioning like Anish. However, I do have my significant moments of doubt and question when I am doing *Nyaya* or logic rather than *Advaita* or non-dualist *Vedanta*. At that point reason gets the better part of me than intuition.

So, I think a lot about this and related issues. Since much of my thinking goes around philosophical issues that are significant in Hindu thought, I can call myself thinking Hindu. Since the thought is primarily philosophical, I can call myself a philosophical Hindu. Like Hinduism in its historical life I am involved in the issues surrounding the nature of the self. In this way I am clearly a Hindu. Hopefully, this is not too windy a self-introduction for our purposes. Sorry, I subjected you to a lecture. Shows I am still a professor. Any questions?

Sevak: Seems like we are all trying to absorb a lot of thinking from Darshana's self-introduction. Surely, questions will emerge later for deeper discussion. Have we come to the end of our series of self-introductions?

Madhyama: Sevakji, each of us knows you as a good friend and you also mentor some of us. What can you tell us about yourself that will be appropriate for this group and its objective? Could it be a self-introduction such as we gave?

Sevak: I am privileged to be considered a friend by all of you and will try to stand up to the responsibility it involves. I hesitated in my mind just a while ago, thinking my position as a Hindu to be too complex to be

labeled in one adjective, which I was audacious enough to impose on you. But I must submit to the same norm I laid on you. So, here goes. Let me call myself a constructive Hindu and subject myself to questions from you.

Madhyama: Sevakji, I am interested to know about what leads to complexity in your Hinduism and what does your constructive Hinduism look like.

Sevak: Madhyama, both of your queries are straightforward, legitimate and well directed. Let me first speak on how complexity arises for me in general thinking about life and world and then about how it works its way in my thought about Hinduism.

Life is complex. A little while ago we alluded to Einstein, a renowned master of complexity, who said that we should make things as simple as possible but not less. I like that. It shows clearly and succinctly that things cannot be reduced to an extreme form of simplicity without losing some accuracy and clarity, not to speak of credibility and feasibility. Things were probably less complex some centuries ago. But now they are complex indeed. Every individual is different from others and we have more individuals on the planet than we ever had before. To put them in one simple basket would not do justice to them.

Another reason why our idea of the cultured world has grown intricate is that we know and live with many a different culture than we did before. Development of sociology and anthropology has made us widely aware about differences and diversity within and among cultures. The resultant complexity of the universe around us and of the microcosm within us is stupefying and has stultified many a thinker. Add to this the acceleration of history that technology keeps pushing on us. All this makes me wary of trusting a simple-minded formula to cover life, its mysteries and its prospects.

At the same time, I resist driving myself to a point of desperation, finding a false sense of security inside a hopeless pit of chaos, anarchism and nihilism by way of reaction. Entire styles of intellectualism have arisen with such tendencies, which form blind alleys leading to fundamental uncertainty as if mimicking Heisenberg's uncertainty principle, this time in human rather than quantum mechanics.

Darshana: Existentialism and emotivism come to mind as such intellectual styles, which have played out a role in recent past. More recently relativism, postmodernism and noncognitivism have been more active on this front. Would you agree, Sevakji?

Sevak: Yes, largely speaking. For myself, swimming against the tide of the erosion of core universality, I tend to think that there is a workable implicit order to the seemingly overwhelming complexity and that we will benefit from trying to approximate its nature and structure. It is not easy and I won't make tall claims of having discovered it in a final sense. But I find hope in making moves toward approximating the nature and structure of this order to obtain a direction for life. I think every individual and group would be better off for its own sake and for the sake of others if they would endeavor to find this order as well as they can and relate with it. Conceptions of this order will differ but no conception should serve just a select few. Optimally, all conceptions should aim at serving the widest possible number, if not the entire humanity and its environment simultaneously.

Coming to Hinduism, it is obvious that it is rooted in the minds and hearts of a large number of sages who, as a group, embraced a great deal of complexity that life presented to them over thousands of years. Their selfless wisdom emanating from their life dedicated to the welfare of all living beings deserves deep respect, if not loyal reverence. But if we put together their timeless wisdom passed to us over such a long span of time and look at it as a unit, we would be bewildered by its complexity, not to speak of occasional irrelevancy and mutual conflict of its parts. This necessitates an effort to put some construction on the aggregate wisdom, ironically, to reduce its overwhelming complexity to a manageable universal core efficiently balanced by flexible and open-ended dynamism. But the resulting construction cannot be expected to be a simple formula. It will not be so complex that it stultifies, but it will still be far from being simplistic or even simple.

Times and things have changed. They always change, whether for better or worse or for both in sporadic fits. It is not possible to stand still forever in this flux, which is more powerful than all of us put together. Hinduism itself is a part of this cosmic flux and thus ends up being different from person to person, group to group and time to time. The way we conceive the order implicit in the dynamic complexity of life needs to have some relatively fixed features that anchor it for a span greater than the lives of a couple of generations before and after us. At the same time, it should be presently relevant and eminently suitable for the life just ahead of us. If it can only support the past but cannot be counted on to support the future except in a wishful world, it will fail to serve us truly well.

This is why I am for constructing a relatively flexible and open Hinduism that is useful for our day and age. When we do it, however, we should not lose sight of a solid set of values that should serve as a

deeply human and humanitarian foundation. It seems there is a need in Hinduism to construct this foundation as well. If the sages were truly wise, our task will be just to rediscover rather than invent the foundation. I believe that much, even if not all, of this foundation is a matter of rediscovering and reformulating the timeless wisdom of the sages.

The upshot is that I see the construction of Hinduism as a challenge. I want to accept the challenge and want to do the hard thinking necessary to accomplish as much as I can. The challenge of construction can be extended to religions and philosophies other than Hinduism. But Hinduism is as large as life and we all here feel to be part of it. Hence, taking up the challenge within Hinduism can set a good example for others to do the same in their non-Hindu folds, which can eventually lead to a grand construction to encompass the whole of human life. I am mindful that even the grand construction will be at best a rough but worthwhile approximation to the ideal. Even the best of it would only be a first step in the great journey of the human spirit. But it will be a useful first step in the right direction, particularly if we apply lessons from the past and avoid serious errors.

Much noise is raised at a high decibel level, issuing dire warnings, that such a construction however humble, tentative, open and flexible, is in its essence a mistake and is bound to fail miserably. The causes of this discontent are various and have historical, psychological and ideological roots. In my view, they do not have much ground to stand on and will dissipate as a passing fashion. For, the humanity is bound eventually to discover the need to live together in peace and will feel the force of having to construct a workable order. In a way, as Voltaire said, if God does not exist, we will have to invent one.

Darshana: Sevakji, I was just about to ask a question as to how you relate the quest for an implicit order in the universe with the order implicit in the thought of Hindu sages. But you dealt with it, effectively saying that the Hindu order will be a harmonizing part of the larger cosmic order. I have another question. I have found that sometimes even thoughtful Hindus overstate the Hindu penchant for unity in diversity and make Hinduism into an overly simple affair as if anything goes and no serious debates occur within Hinduism.

Sevak: Yes, Darshana. There are two problems with it. One, Hinduism is portrayed as a simplistic way of life where one sits in a cave and meditates forever. Another, the Hindu tolerance is stretched to make one feel that Hinduism permits just about anything. Both are serious distortions. Hinduism is not monolithic. In your self-introduction, you

referred to the six systems of traditional Hindu philosophy. They are complex and subdivide into many more lines of thought. Vedanta, the dominant system of the six, itself divides into at least half a dozen different viewpoints. Hinduism is more of a congregation of religions than just a plain simple religion. It has indigenously grown virtually every major principle of the world religions. Its complexity is a present fact and veritable challenge. Many thinkers are not patient enough to attempt a clear comprehension of its rich complexity.

Anish: But, Sevakji, suppose that one is careful enough not to overstate even the dominant aspect like non-dualism of the individual and cosmic self that Darshana referred to in her self-introduction. One would then avoid the erroneous identification of Hinduism with just one dominant part of it. Still, if one wants to be truly representative of what Hinduism stands for, one must reflect and honor the tremendous diversity and plurality of which Hinduism is a veritable treasure. Shouldn't people be encouraged to highlight in their life whatever aspect of Hinduism they best relate to?

Sevak: I will agree partially with you on this, Anish. If a Hindu chooses to identify with a particular aspect of Hinduism out of its large repertoire, it should be his or her prerogative and a right to do so. I would just be careful not to characterize that, however, as Hinduism proper. There are many places to take shelter under a great banyan tree but no one taking the shelter is the banyan tree. Or, the river Ganga can quench the thirst of many, but no one becomes the Ganga by drinking from her waters.

Anish: I am glad that Hinduism of your conception makes room for such respect for difference. At the same time I see that while Hinduism allows considerable individualism, it does not promote egotistic narcissism in the name of individuality.

Navin: I have a question, Sevakji. As you describe yourself as a constructive Hindu, I am reminded of Mahatma Gandhi's use of the word "constructive" in his famous phrase "constructive program." Can you indicate briefly what shape your constructive Hinduism would take?

Sevak: Good question, Navin. I did think of "constructive program" when I came up with my term "constructive Hinduism." The Mahatma's perceptive vision of constructive program was practically oriented. Mine aims at achieving an open, flexible but also fairly steady order of concepts and principles that would underpin the salient complexity of

Hinduism. Constructive Hinduism will relate those concepts and principles in a way that should make it easily recognizable as Hinduism in terms of the past, present and, hopefully, future of Hinduism. We should avoid making it into a simple plea for diversity or a maze of unbearable complexity or a plain all-is-one mystification.

Darshana: Sevakji, am I wrong in thinking that your constructive Hinduism is going to be a form of a philosophy of Hinduism rather than a straight-out characterization of Hinduism? I also detect in your answer an understandable unwillingness to open up and say exactly what form your constructive Hinduism will take.

Sevak: Your diagnosis is accurate on both fronts, Darshana. It will be more of a philosophy of Hindu thought and spirituality than just a regurgitation of overt Hinduism. I am avoiding a full-fledged description of the details at this point because, at the outset, we need to cover more of Hinduism itself. I hope you people will let me defer the details. Can you stand a little suspense? I will proffer or rather elicit details when we will have covered more background. You will then have the opportunity to subject it to a full line of questioning. In addition, may I say that I want to refrain from claiming that I've got it all fixed and stored in my mind? Please allow me to keep learning as I think in greater depth, detail and refinement along with you in this seminar.

Madhyama: Sevakji, in this day and age where modesty is not regarded as the best policy, I want to commend you for elegantly combining modesty with subtlety.

Sanskriti: I believe too that Sevakji has a fairly detailed caricature of reconstructed Hinduism in his mind. But, Sevakji, may I ask a question on another line, which will not pressure you to deliver your full-fledged position prematurely? Does your constructive Hinduism claim that Hinduism is self-contained? Or would it say that Hinduism has a monopoly on wisdom or truth? Most religions of the world seem to imply that each has a monopoly and hence an exclusive and privileged status. Hinduism seems to be different from such exclusivist stances. I feel we have touched this question a little while ago, but I want to hear more on it from Sevakji.

Sevak: Sanskriti, my constructive Hinduism will not claim that Hinduism is self-contained or that it has a stranglehold on truth. At the same time, it will want to bring out the rationale behind Hinduism's openness. A

good part of the rationale is contained in the statement of a sage in the *Rig-veda*, the most ancient scripture of Hinduism: *a no bhadrah kratavo yantu vishvatah*, which means "let good thoughts come to us from all directions." It shows the ancient roots of the openness of Hinduism, where wisdom and truth are sought after regardless of where they can be found. It affirms that there is wisdom to be found everywhere if we look for it with an open mind.

Sanatan: But, Sevakji, one has to guard against making the rationale an open invitation for everyone to think that Hinduism has no salient wisdom to offer and is just a place to store wisdom that comes from outside.

Sevak: Yes, Sanatan, Hinduism is definitely not a dumping ground. For the most part it already has wisdom that is claimed by others outside it. It, however, recognizes that wisdom that is revealed to its sages is capable of being revealed also to sages outside its cultural fold, albeit dressed up differently in their cultural garbs. Sages can exist not just in Hinduism. Sages and their wisdom can be born wherever the proper conditions for nurturing the tradition of sages take root. Those conditions, however, must be fulfilled. What we call sages themselves may appear outside as prophets or shamans.

Mahila: Sevakji, I hope your constructive Hinduism will not preempt any alternatives that may be budding in our own midst.

Sevak: That is a valid concern, Mahila. It too is one reason why I am reluctant to bring it out at this early stage. I do not want to prejudice or impede your or others' growth on Hinduism. I recognize that there is much more than just one adjective to the Hinduism of everyone here. On top of that, each of you can learn more and augment your Hinduism to enhance your life. When I get to bring out more of constructive Hinduism, I would like everyone to approach it like the legendary swan. You know that, if a swan is presented with milk mixed with water, it will separate milk and consume it, leaving the water aside.

Sanskriti: I like the idea of being the legendary swan!

Navin: How about going out into the field to learn more about how Hinduism is really lived and experienced by those who would call themselves Hindus?

Mahila: I would like to consider comparing mainland Hindus' viewpoint to that of Diaspora Hindus.

Sevak: Navin, Mahila, your thoughts are running in positive direction. Many ideas can emerge here with beneficial potential. The format of this seminar may not be able to sustain their full blossoming but the seminar's spirit will surely encourage you to pursue them individually or in groups. Feel free to report any relevant experiences to us.

Madhyama: I know many here have different ideas ready to become lively projects on very diverse lines of life work. I am glad you are open to them, Sevakji, although I see that we cannot possibly accommodate them all without losing considerable grip on our focus.

Sanatan: Let us first have our own roots established and secured, before spreading out for an ambitious outreach.

Sevak: Sanatan makes a good point. We need to go farther with our own effort here first. But keep the outreach in mind in case you see good opportunities materializing. We should also beware of spreading ourselves too thin. We need to work within our limits. We certainly have a lot of focused work ahead of us. Still, I am pleased we have in our midst a very generous desire to reach out.

Madhyama: This is exciting and energizing. Well, I do not see any hands raised to indicate further questions for Sevakji, at least for now. I want to thank you, Sevakji, for your self-introduction and for answering the latest round of questions. The group is excited. We truly look forward to thinking with you in our future sessions.

Sevak: I am already learning a good deal from each of you. I enjoyed your self-introductions. I appreciate your contributions. I may incorporate elements of your approaches in my constructive Hinduism. I look forward to further contributions from you so that our collective thinking can result in a form that deserves to be called "Hinduism for Today," at least for us. It is my hope that it will be a Hinduism that we will all share to a significant extent, without seriously eroding the individual creative uniqueness of the Hinduism of each participant here. If my expectation turns out to be too optimistic, we will have a plurality of Hinduism for Today. Hopefully, our effort will also lead others to evolve their own Hinduism for Today and, if a larger dialog happens, a

Hinduism for Today will emerge that will be relevant and beneficial for a much bigger number of Hindus than just the eight of us.
Madhyama, you have been keeping an eye on the group and its workings. I would like to know from you how the session worked and whether the ground rules were useful in making it work.

Madhyama: Subject to others in the group voicing their disagreement, my surmise is that the dialog went well and the ground rules worked. We respected each other. We wanted to learn more about each other and asked everyone to expand on what they said so that we could know them more. For myself at least, I can say that now I know everyone much better and look forward to hearing more from them. I gained insights into Hinduism as each of us said what made them Hindu. I heard very few Sanskrit terms or other technical terms. It was helpful that Sevakji intervened once to explain the term "sage" and then to explain the four stages of life. Some philosophical terms Darshana used went overhead of a few participants. But ask here to explain, if you are curious. I also noticed that we steered clear of politics. I believe the group would like Sevakji to continue facilitating the seminar. Sevakji, can you tell us what we should be thinking about by way of preparation for our next session?

Sevak: Thank you, Madhyama and all of you in the group for being gracious enough to live with my rather lengthy self-introduction. The topic to think about for our next session is the nature of Hinduism. I would like each of us to think about what are some, if not all, of the important features of Hinduism. Each can think in their own way. We will merge our thoughts into a discourse and try to reach viable conclusions, which should help us to propel the dialog further. To put it differently, please think about an answer to the question: What is Hinduism? I feel we had a wonderful time. Thank you all, again. We will see you the next time.

All: *Namas-te*, Sevakji.

Sevak: *Namas-te*, everybody.

SESSION 2:

ON DEFINING HINDUISM

Sevak: *Om Tat Sat*, everybody. Welcome to the second session of the seminar on Hinduism for Today.

Sanatan: *Om Tat Sat*, Sevakji. I am more used to hearing "Hari Om" or "Hari Om Tat Sat."

Sevak: Yes, Sanatan, those greetings are more common. I wanted to do something different. I went to the Bhagavad-gita, Chapter 17, verse 23, and borrowed from Shri Krishna's statement there that "Om Tat Sat" is the threefold reference to Brahman. I guess all here are aware that Brahman is the name for the ultimate spiritual reality in Hinduism.

Anish: Yes, we are. *Om Tat Sat*, Sevakji.

Darshana: That's very nice, Sevakji. *Om Tat Sat.*

Navin: *Om Tat Sat*, Sevakji.

Madhyama: *Om Tat Sat*, Sevakji.

Sanskriti: *Om Tat Sat*, Sevakji.

Mahila: Sevakji, *Om Tat Sat.*

Sevak: *Om Tat Sat*, all of you, again. Everybody, please relax. Be at ease and feel at home. We had a great round of self-introductions last time. I hope everyone feels comfortable being a part of this group, which is engaged in a seminar called "Hinduism for Today."

Madhyama: Sevakji, I have been talking to everyone. I find that all are excited. Our latent fears about being mistreated or offended by others in the group were proved to be wrong. We recognize that we are all friends and want to learn from each other. We want to contribute toward building something together that will help us see Hinduism through a more constructive and insightful perspective. We feel such Hinduism can only enhance our life.

Sevak: I am very glad to hear that, Madhyama. It's quite gratifying to be surrounded by such good friends.

Mahila: Feels like we are a harmonious mini-community.

Sanskriti: All of us are feeling great about the seminar. Let us get started.

Anish: Forgive me, but I want to interject a request before we plunge into our main topic today.

Madhyama: Sure, Anish.

Anish: The title of our seminar is "Hinduism for Today." In the first session we talked about the meaning and implication of the word "today" in this context. We are about to enter into defining Hinduism and will talk about it in depth and detail. The subtitle for our seminar is "A Seminar in the Philosophy of Hindu Thought and Spirituality." I wonder if it is out of place to have a brief description of the three terms left: seminar, philosophy and spirituality.

Sevak: Anish, I admire your thoroughness. Let me indicate what is involved in the terms seminar and spirituality as I think about them. I will then request Darshana to say briefly what philosophy means. A seminar involves an intellectual dialog among individuals on a specific subject where each individual contributes and participates in the proceedings on an equal basis but under the supervision of a convener. The group freely asks questions and even challenges statements made by anyone in the group. There is no predetermined conclusion that members are asked to reach.

Spirituality is a much misunderstood, even among intellectuals. I recall colleagues of mine in history, social science and even religious studies making fun of the term by making crude references to spirits and wine. Their graceless ignorance is confounding. But, a clear and serious meaning of "spirituality" has surely risen to the fore. It understands the term as referring to the personal, experiential and deeply existential side of religion. In this context, I'd reserve the term religion to the social, institutional and doctrinal side of religion. The spiritual side explores that side of religion which empathizes with what religious persons seek in their life in terms of actually experiencing a deep existential dimension within themselves. This dimension often results in an experience of bliss and inner fulfillment shrouded in various theological

garbs borrowed from institutional side of religion. By the way, spirituality is the side of religion that has done nearly all the good that religion has wrought, unlike the institutional side which has heaped constant havoc and strife on world history.

Madhyama: I guess we can overwhelm Sevakji with many querries but I won't recommend that digression. We have important agenda to consider. Darshana, how about a brief characterization of philosophy?

Darshana: The meaning of the word philosophy is itself a knotty topic in philosophy. I have taught a number of seminars in the subject of the nature of philosophy. Let me make a brief statement on what I regard as philosophy. Succinctly, philosophy attempts a rational explication of our world. We share a common world but also live in our own individual worlds. "Our world" includes all these worlds. Philosophy primarily uses reason to understand and explain our wolrd in general and comprehensive terms. I am open to questions but, I am afraid, it may take a whole long series of lectures to consider the subject in respectable detail.

Madhyama: We won't bother you with any questions, Darshana, at this point. Anish, do you, though, have a good basic idea now of the three terms in question?

Anish: Yes, Madhyama, and much more. I got lot of food for thought too. Thank you, Sevakji and Darshana for the succinct answers. Sevakji, please continue leading us in today's topic.

Sevak: What is Hinduism? That is the question. Usually, such a question is understood as a request for definition. A definition is best understood in philosophy. I would like Darshana, our resident philosopher, to shed light on what a definition is about. We will then seek to apply the light to Hinduism and see how we can work best with it.

Darshana: Two types of definition are notable: stipulative and descriptive. Take an example. Say, we want to define religion. Stipulative definition of religion, then, will tell us what *we*, the definers, are prepared to identify as religion. We can stipulate, so to say, to make and mould the definition in such a way as to apply it to whatever we have determined as its field of application. Thus, if we want the result to exclude Buddhism, we can define, with the standard Western dictionaries

of the English language, that religion is a belief in and worship of a personal God. So, by a stroke of the pen, Buddhism is defined out of existence as a religion! Perhaps, these dictionaries did it out of ignorance or chauvinism. On the other hand, descriptive definition aims at applying to what really are all the religions in the world and will not exclude any real religion. But it assumes that there is an objective set of religions that is known to us as a fact. In sum, what it boils down to is the degree of subjectivity we are prepared to tolerate.

Anish: Goodness! This is a tangle that is hard to escape from. Either way there is a problem. If I stipulate, I cannot avoid being subjective. If I describe the field, I have to be absolutely objective, which is a prohibitive undertaking. Is there anything in the world that can escape from this tangle? If not, we can't seem to be able to define anything at all!

Darshana: Anish, this is what logical problems of philosophy are made of. It's just a sample of what philosophers have to deal with.

Sanskriti: Darshana has trumped me. I am stuck. But I don't like to be stuck. Help!

Madhyama: I pride myself on finding compromises in conflicts. But how do you do that to this conflict? Sevakji, How is a definition approached in Hindu philosophy?

Sevak: Definition is called *lakshana* in Sanskrit. When you want to achieve *lakshana* of something, you take care that it does not result in what is called *avyapti* or *ativyapti*. For instance, if you define religion as a system characterized by belief in Goddess, there will be *avyapti* or insufficient extension because systems with belief in male God will be excluded. If you define religion as emotional outpouring, there will be *ativyapti* or overextension because a good deal of poetry will creep in as religion.

Sanatan: I suggest we begin to take a look at Hinduism and see how good a *lakshana* we can achieve.

Darshana: We do not lose anything in trying. Maybe that way we will somehow get something that is useful for our purposes.

Sanatan: All the six traditional systems of Hindu philosophy are called *astika* because they accept the authority of the *Veda*. Accordingly, one conservative way of thinking about Hinduism is that a Hindu is one who accepts the authority of the *Veda*. By the way, the term *Veda* stands for the texts generally recognized by Hindus as their basic scripture. It comprises an enormous literature within its compass. Darshana, can acceptance of the authority of the *Veda* help us achieve a satisfactory definition?

Darshana: In our self-introductions we talked about respecting the ancient sages and the *Veda* is a product of the sages' intuition. So, this is a potentially fruitful avenue. But can we agree on what the term *Veda* is supposed to include? If we can, the further question is what do we mean by accepting its authority? Do we believe in each and every statement there? What do we do if we find conflicting statements? Remember that the *Veda* comprises a vast literature, even if you include only the four *Samhita* volumes and exclude all the *Brahmana, Aranyaka* and *Upanishad* volumes.

Navin: I am not prepared to let go of the *Upanishad*s, any way.

Sanatan: I suppose none of us is.

Sevak: Let us face it. If we insist on pursuing the track of accepting the authority of the *Veda*, we face difficult choices on what to include and what to exclude as "Veda." Each choice will result in a special form of Hinduism that may be preferred by one group of Hindus but not by others. This will be the case of *avyapti* or insufficient coverage. If we have to err, I would prefer erring on the side of including a bit more rather than a lot less.

Madhyama: Suppose we go for maximum coverage and include the entire Vedic corpus. We will then cover a vast array of diverse forms of Hinduism, right?

Sevak: That seems so, Madhyama.

Madhyama: In our self-introductions we were priding ourselves on being inclusive rather than being exclusive, so here is our chance of being inclusive.

Sanatan: If we want to pursue the track of accepting an authoritative scripture in an inclusive way, why not then do it directly and go all the way?

Navin: What do you mean, Sanatan?

Sevak: I know what he means. It would be the conservative suggestion, which, in the case of Hinduism, is typically inclusive. The Hindu authoritative texts are divided in two categories: *shruti* and *smriti*. *Shruti* has the primary authority and includes the entire Vedic literature, comprising the *Samhita, Brahmana, Aranyaka, Upanishad* and the *Dharma-sutra* volumes. *Smriti* has the secondary authority and includes the *Smriti* volumes such as those of Manu, Yajnavalkya *et al.* We will need to include the six-fold *Vedanga* literature too, which comprises phonetics, prosody, lexicon, grammar, injunctions and astronomy. These six are meant to help us understand the meaning of the *Veda*. Then, if we want to be super-inclusive and still stay within the classical Hindu tradition, we can go by the maxim: *itihasa-puranabhyam vedam samupabrimhayet*, which means, one should seek to know the full intent of the *Veda* by using the history tradition and the cosmology tradition. The literature of the history tradition includes the famous epics *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana*. What I have called the cosmology tradition comprises the stupendous literature that includes eighteen *Purana* volumes plus all the *Upapurana* volumes. Sanatan, would you include all this or exclude anything here?

Sanatan: If I had the choice, I will not exclude anything that is purportedly written by a sage. I would rather live with the problem of excessive and conflicting texts than exclude any sages arbitrarily, for I won't know what wisdom I am cutting myself out of and why.

Sevak: Well said in consonance with the conservative viewpoint.

Darshana: What we are trying to do presently is follow what in Hindu philosophy is called *shabda-pramana* or accepting reliable testimony as a valid means of knowledge.

Madhyama: Yes, we are following the path of accepting the testimony of the sages here. They composed the *Veda* and the ancillary literature.

Darshana: What we have arrived at is this: Hinduism is essentially what is indicated by *shruti, smriti, itihasa* and *purana*. All these four

categories or genres of religious literature are the classical sources of Hindu thought on philosophy, religion and culture. The Western religions -- meaning Judaism, Christianity and Islam -- call themselves religions of the book, because each has a sacred book it follows. If we want to define ourselves in terms of our sacred literature, this is where we end up, namely, with *shruti, smriti, itihasa* and *purana*.

Theology is not included under sacred texts of world religions generally. That is why I have not included *darshana* or metaphysical vision as an authoritative source of Hinduism here. Otherwise, we would have five rather than four categories. Of course, one can make the case that *darshana* ought to be included as a source of Hinduism. Anyway, the idea of the authority of the *Veda* logically expands into the four categories I explained, that is, *shruti, smriti, itihasa* and *purana*.

Anish: If we accept everything in these four giant sources, our minds will start reeling and will spin out of shape. We either accept my viewpoint, which is that each Hindu should be free to select whatever appeals to him or her from among these four, or we must find a way to narrow the field by means of some further criteria.

Sanskriti: The criterion of authoritative texts has led us to these four. We must now seek some other criterion. Darshana has a sharp philosophical mind. She is also the one responsible for getting us into this! Darshana, can you guide us further on this path?

Darshana: A philosopher knows how to get you into logical puzzles, not how to get out of them! I have been doing philosophy for ages now. What is fascinating is that you just cannot find an easy way out. Recently, philosophers have tried to dodge the issues in variegated ways. But I stay close to the classical tradition in philosophy and take the problems seriously. Some styles of dodging are highly respectable among the verbose elite. But, to me, they are just the passing fashion. If avoiding or escaping the basic issues was easy, philosophy would have stopped existing long ago. So, I am not going to join the noisy crowd of issue-dodgers in philosophy. Let me try to show you some ways to try. One would be to construct concepts or principles that would narrow the overpopulated field. Sevakji, can you take us further?

Sevak: Hindu philosophy notes two kinds of definition: *sva-rupa lakshana* or internal definition and *tata-stha lakshana* or external definition. If, say, you want to define a kangaroo, you can describe its internal features and functions, like the short front legs, the long hind

legs, and the sac it carries and so on. Alternatively, you can describe its habitat in Australia and converge toward locating and identifying it where it lives. Also, you can go the way of biology by taking the immediately wider genus, adding the proper differentia and thus achieving the right coverage. The first would be the internal way and the rest the external ways of defining a kangaroo. Do you get the idea that this can stretch beyond kangaroos to just about everything?

Mahila: Yes, if we look at the matter this way, it would seem we have not followed either of the two ways. We have gone into what are the four authoritative sources of Hinduism but we have not entered into Hinduism itself so far. Nor have we tried to distinguish it from other religions, which would be an external way of defining it.

Darshana: You are right, Mahila. Pursuing these two avenues now can help us narrow the unnerving impact of the four resources in an important way.

Sanskriti: Why don't we pursue the external path first and then converge on the internal? It seems less difficult to distinguish Hinduism from its alternatives than wading through its tremendous variety and complexity just as a starting point.

Madhyama: Good point, Sanskriti! But do we want to distinguish Hindu philosophy from other philosophies or Hindu religion from other religions?

Darshana: There is an overlap of content between philosophy and religion, but their methodologies differ. Philosophy tends to a greater reliance on reason while religion relies more on faith. The two are distinct and separate in Western thought but as far as Hinduism is concerned they go together.

Sevak: Darshana has put the matter succinctly and clearly. Hinduism tends to think that philosophy is like theory and religion is like practice. The two need each other and should not be arbitrarily separated.

Madhyama: That makes more sense to me than their separation in the West.

Anish: But the separation in the West may have been necessary because Western religions rely a great deal on dogmatic beliefs, while Western

philosophy aligns itself more with science. How does this affect Hinduism?

Darshana: During the medieval period philosophy in the West was the handmaid of Christian theology. In the modern age, Western philosophy has found a different rising sun to worship, namely, science. So, it worships science and sometimes overdoes it.

Sanskriti: From one rising sun to another! So much for its rationality and objectivity. Is this what is called scientism?

Anish: Eastern philosophy can be reproached too for going after its own perceived objects of veneration, which become standards of truth-value.

Sevak: Then in a huff of reaction some would decry rationality and objectivity themselves and drown in nihilism and chaotic blind alleys.

Darshana: Existentialism and postmodernism! Use rationality and objectivity obliquely and even claim them chauvinistically while talking about Eastern thought as sentimental mysticism. Yet call traditional philosophy logocentric with a straight face! It is no use pointing out self-contradictions in these shamelessly Teflon "philosophies"!

Mahila: I won't exempt some forms of feminism either from these tendencies.

Darshana: Sorry for delving into professional philosophy's lingo. Yes, Sanskriti, scientism makes science and scientific method the axiomatic and exclusive touchstone of truth. Quite a few Western philosophers are committed to scientism of one sort or another. On the other hand and to be fair, it is not easy to draw the line between legitimate and illegitimate uses of science in philosophy. The matter gets involved.

But, refocusing on Hinduism, one can say that philosophy's charge that religion is based on dogmatic beliefs does not apply to Hinduism as much as it does to Western religions. That is because Hinduism has good deal of its thought based on experience and reason and relies on dogma to a significantly smaller extent than Western religions. Still, it must be said that Hinduism cannot be said to rely preeminently on reason. But, then, can one say that of Western philosophy either? It is notable that currently there is a great deal of ferment in Western philosophy about the place of reason in philosophy. Here I am looking at

the other side of the coin, so to say, and exposing my own philosophizing struggles.

Sevak: After all, Darshana, you are a human philosopher!

Darshana: Thanks, but no thanks, Sevakji, for this two-edged whatever it is.

Mahila: Would you agree, Darshana, that science is the third rising sun that Western philosophy has found to worship? It worshipped reason in the ancient times, switching to Christianity in the medieval period and then finding another "religion," namely, science in this day and age.

Darshana: Seems like a good point, Mahila. I would say, though, that its worship of reason was its golden age, for it takes courage to follow reason when reason leads you against common sense, let alone established power structure. Socrates had to accept hemlock in the process. Ever since, Western philosophy found its religion and rarely raised a serious finger against the establishment. After Socrates, there has been no philosopher martyr.

Sanskriti: All this leads me to this conclusion. Western philosophy is a paper tiger and I need not be afraid of it when I hear its criticism of Hinduism or Hindu philosophy and religion.

Anish: I am an engineer and have scientific background. But I do not worship science. To me, science is just a very useful tool. I should be in command of using it. I won't relinquish my judgment to it. If much of Western philosophy is overawed by science, that does not speak well of philosophy's independence. How does the West talk loudly about freedom when its philosophy has sold itself out? Hinduism may have faults, but I doubt that it sells itself out to the going glamour in the market.

Sevak: Well, there are Hindus who keep finding the latest discoveries of science in the *Veda*. This can be credible if the discoveries are found in the *Veda* way *before* science proves them and the mathematical equations that prove them are also discovered. Any way, we had a very interesting detour, which has application and use as far as Hinduism is concerned. But we need to return to the point of defining Hinduism from external and internal perspectives. Let us try to use our newly gained perspective on Western religion and philosophy in trying to define

Hinduism externally. I credit Sanskriti coming out with this suggestion in the first place.

Darshana: Sevakji, I can't resist plunging in philosophizing even if it goes on detours. More often than not, it ends up in detours. When we are not seriously digressing, however, it shows that there are hidden connections among apparently unrelated subjects.

Sevak: Philosophy is always fascinating, Darshana. One never fails to gain insights when one thinks deeply about anything.

Madhyama: So, how do we apply our newly acquired perspective on philosophy and religion to the question of defining Hinduism externally?

Mahila: If Western philosophy relies, or claims to rely, on reason and Western religions rely on belief and dogma, what does Hinduism rely on? An answer to this question can make us see the similarities and differences between Hinduism and its Western counterparts. Then we can turn our attention to non-Western religions and philosophies and see, finally, how Hinduism is similar to or different from them.

Sanskriti: Seems like a good strategy to me. This may get us unstuck from the dilemma between stipulative and descriptive definitions.

Sanatan: Sevakji, can you help us further?

Sevak: While Hinduism does accept the authority of the *Veda*, the acceptance has not resulted in stagnation. The *Veda* itself contains the intuition of many sages spread over a wide region and over a long period. As a result, the *Veda* is far from being monolithic. Understandably, accepting it led to a furtherance of diversity in the form of six traditional systems of philosophy and the four well-known paths leading to the spiritual goal.

The philosophical systems rely on the *pramana*s or the means of knowledge. Three *pramana*s are used by most systems: *pratyaksha* or direct experience, *anumana* or inferential reason and *shabda* or reliable testimony. I am simplifying the situation and avoiding description of other *pramana*s discussed. My perspective on the three means of knowledge is this. Direct experience is the root. Seeing is believing, as the saying goes. *Pratyaksha* literally means that which is before the eyes. It is the strongest. Inferential reason in Hinduism is strictly tied to direct experience. If the yonder hill has smoke, there must be fire there,

because we have directly experienced that where there is smoke there is fire, such as in the kitchen and that where there is no smoke there is no fire, such as in a lake.

Reliable testimony is admissible because it reports the direct experience of the sages. It won't be authoritative if the sages were reporting their imagination. Now, because sages devoted themselves to seeing and not just conceptualizing the truth and because they put in a great deal of disciplined effort, called *tapas*, into it, they acquired the ability to see the truth which was beyond the eyes of the average person.

Just as science is able to see beyond the naked eye by using microscope and telescope, the sages are able to see beyond the naked eye by using internal microscope and telescope they developed. Unlike the prophets in Western religions, the sages of Hinduism were not arbitrarily chosen by a divine power to receive special revelations. They earned their powers and anyone who follows the same practices and discipline as they did can also earn them and see the same truths. At least this is how the Hindu tradition views the matter.

Darshana: Sevakji, is this also the reason why this power, achieved by the sages, is called *arsha-pratyaksha* rather than *arsha-vidhi* or *arsha-nishedha*?

Sevak: That never occurred to me, Darshana. You have a good insight. Yes, there is no directive or imperative here, which is what principally happens in the Western religions. We are talking about the statements of the sages where they are just reporting what they are seeing.

Anish: This is very interesting. It puts the matter in a very different light from Western religions. Hinduism, this way, stands out as following something like a spiritual scientific method, which is empirical in its own right.

Sevak: I do not mean to say that this account has no problems. But it makes sense as a Hindu account of the matter.

Madhyama: Sevakji, I would like you to finish your account of the four spiritual paths in the same way that you narrated the account of the *pramanas* in the six philosophical systems.

Sevak: Thanks, Madhyama, for getting me back on the track. First of all, the four spiritual paths of Hinduism are the path of knowledge or *jnana-yoga*, the path of selfless action or *karma-yoga*, the path of devotion or

bhakti-yoga and the path of meditation or *dhyana-yoga*, which is also called *raja-yoga* or the royal path.

As I see it, the four spiritual paths aim at developing the same *arsha-pratyaksha* or intuition of the sage but in specific relation to *moksha* or the highest spiritual goal. The goal is to see the deepest reality within and beyond. Western thought seems to be in the grips of the notion that, what is inside can best be understood through what is outside. Hindu thought, on the other hand, proceeds on a counter-presupposition that what is outside can best be understood through what is inside. Science, for example, tries to understand mind through the mechanisms of the brain. Hindu sages tried to understand the world through a microscopic understanding of the self within.

It won't matter whether you believe that the self within is the same in essence as the cosmic self beyond. Even if it is different, the self is the key that unlocks the proper understanding of the outside world, at least the understanding that is necessary for the best existential interest and potential of the self. This deepest self, then, as it is linked with the world as we know it, is to be seen, not just conceived. In fact, it cannot be conceived or categorized. To really see or experience it by realizing it or being one with it is the ultimate goal of spiritual journey.

All the four spiritual paths lead to the same goal. However, they use different aspects of the apparent self in the process. The apparent self is the immediately felt self which we experience every day, engaged in all kinds of perceptions, thoughts, desires, emotions, etc. that we go through moment by moment. The apparent self is activated by consciousness that is part and parcel of the nature of the deepest self. But it is motivated by following intellect, will or emotion. Or, in other words, its motivations follow intellect, will or emotion. Despite my self-image as an intellectual, for example, my real motivator that actuates my decisions in life may be emotion. So, one has to be very careful in really knowing what is the true motivator. This is where an authentic guru, a personal spiritual guide, can be of real help.

Suppose, however, that my real motivator is emotion. In that case, most of my decisions in life are made because of emotion rather than intellect or will. When I want to choose a spiritual path for myself, I would be better off choosing the path of devotion. The path of knowledge would best fit a person whose true motivator is the intellect. Similarly, the path of selfless action would be the best for a person with the will as the true motivator. The spiritual aspirant is using intellect, will or emotion as a ladder, so to say, to climb up to the top. After getting to the top, one needs to throw the ladder away by shedding the last vestiges and attachment to intellect, will or emotion. The fourth path

of meditation is the high-jump path, which does not use a ladder. It focuses directly on consciousness. It is, therefore, called the royal path or *raja-yoga*, being the most difficult path, on which one should not tread without expert guidance. To summarize the four spiritual paths again, the path of knowledge, suitable for intellectually motivated persons, is called *jnana-yoga*. The path of selfless action, suitable for people motivated by their strong will, is called *karma-yoga* and the path of devotion, suitable for emotionally motivated persons, is called *bhakti-yoga*.

Now, let us look at the world religions. All the Western religions have a strong element of *bhakti-yoga*. With God at the center, they require a total devotion to God with all the emotional effort that a devotee can muster. One should love one's God with all the heart. Secondarily, all of them also enjoin selfless action in the service of God and His children. Even the hard-core theologians in the Western religions use prayer and worship as the primary means to finding closeness to God. While prayer and worship have an element of meditation, they are distinct from meditation as a tool that directly focuses on consciousness. The point is that all of the Western religions primarily employ the path of devotion, with the path of selfless action playing the second fiddle. Of course, we are not talking about those who go to the church once a week. We are talking about those who find a calling to pursue closeness to God full time in their life. Only these people can be said to be following a spiritual path in the Hindu sense of the term. The same also applies to Hindus too!

Turning to some sister religions of Hinduism, we find that Buddhism and Jainism, having no affiliation to a creator God and His authority, are less involved in the paths of devotion and selfless action. Again, we are focusing here mostly on monks and nuns who pursue the spiritual goal full time. If you look at the structure of the final stages of the spiritual paths in Buddhism and Jainism, you will find a great deal of reliance on meditation guided by and aiming at deep knowledge of doctrine. For example, in the final stages of meditation, the Buddhist aspirant is expected to experience the deepest meaning of the Four Noble Truths. The last few of the fourteen stages of the Jain spiritual path are similarly structured around the Jain doctrine. Dogma and belief get an important foothold, with doctrine relied upon as a necessary guide in the final progress of meditation. This is also one guiding and motivating point of the missionary effort in Buddhism. Sikhism, being a great synthesis of elements in Hinduism and Islam, mainly combines the paths of selfless action and devotion with great effect.

The two major religions left to consider are Confucianism and Daoism. Confucianism seems to me to be a distinct example of the path of selfless action, doing away with a crutch-like God. Confucius shunned any carrot or stick. He did not tempt or threaten. One has to do good just for the sake of good. There is no reward or punishment to induce belief or compliance. A significant achievement, especially looking at the twenty-five centuries of millions of people following this selfless path. It has been portrayed in negative light by contemporary ideologues but the self-sacrificial nature of the path is the unsung and largely unrecognized spiritual aspect in it. Failing to acknowledge this spiritual aspect in it, thinkers often call it a humanistic philosophy rather than a religion.

Daoism is a special case and cannot be easily subjected to a category such as what I am trying to expound at this point. It seems to shun method, at least an explicit, systematic method. It relies on spontaneity, creativity and intuitive oneness with the ultimate, which is nature itself. There are elements of Yin or the female attaining much more importance than Yang or the male, contrasting with Confucianism on this point. A point that portrayal of Mira as a spiritual feminist has affinity with. What do you say, Mahila? Would you admit Lao Tzu, the legendary founder of Daoism, as a spiritual feminist?

Mahila: He is a very lovable figure, regardless of whether he fits the mould of Mira's spiritual feminism. Even if I have to stretch spiritual feminism, I would do it to get him in the fold.

Madhyama: Sevakji, thank you for a detailed explanation of your perspective. That was a lot to digest. You have put central features of Hinduism in a broad relation to their counterparts in world religions. May I try to show now how I see the relevance of your statement to the question we were brooding over?

Sevak: It's time someone takes over from me. I do not mean to dominate the dialog. What Navin said to be the Mahatma's vision of the equality of all social vocations should apply to us here. All contributions in this seminar have equal merit.

Sanskriti: You are very generous to us, Sevakji.

Sevak: Madhyama, go ahead.

Madhyama: The question was this. If Western philosophy relies on reason and Western religions rely on faith, what does Hindu philosophy and religion rely on? The answer, based on my understanding of Sevakji's statement, turned out to be *pratyaksha* or direct experience. But this is an uncommon species of direct experience, to be called *arsha-pratyaksha*. It can be attained by anyone who works on a spiritual path. There are four such paths. Three paths use ladders, namely, intellect, will and emotion. One path is direct and does not use ladder. Until one gets to the level of a developed *arsha-pratyaksha* where one realizes the ultimate self in direct experience, one uses one or more of the four spiritual paths and relies upon the particular ladders they use. So, Hinduism cannot be said to be relying on one dominant element such as reason or faith. As a whole, it relies on direct experience as the final arbiter but relies on intellect, emotion and will as ancillary means. In sum, one can say that there is one spiritual being underlying the universe within and the universe beyond and it can be accessed in many ways.

Surprise! I gave a mini-lecture! How did I do it? I never thought I could do that.

Sevakji, should one say that there are only the four ways or would Hinduism imply that there are as many ways as there are aspirants on the spiritual journey?

Sevak: You did a good job with your mini-lecture, Madhyama. Want to be a professor?

Madhyama: No, thank you, Sevakji. I am good where I am; playing the cards I am dealt, in the best way I can. Is it acceptable, Sanatan?

Sanatan: I see you are referring to my self-introduction to the Hindu conservatism as I see it. The answer is yes, especially when I see you doing your situational duties so cheerfully.

Sevak: Oh, the second question Madhyama put to me. How many ways there are to reach the ultimate self? Hinduism admits the basic four but won't say that there is no more to it than the four. The four can be combined in different ways and a competent guru can make a proper combination for an aspirant. Hence, in theory there can be a large number of combinatorial ways. It should be said, however, that the path of knowledge and the path of meditation combine more commonly and easily and so do the path of devotion and the path of selfless action. We have already seen how Western religions exemplify the latter combination.

However, I will not go the full Daoist way and say that every individual has to carve out one's own unique path. The trial and error path can be time-consuming, painful and rather pointless. Hinduism says, in my view, that one should seek a guru who can point the most suitable path for him or her. If one is ready to take up a spiritual path, there is no need to waste time by going on paths that are not suitable for oneself. Path hopping is not highly recommended in Hinduism. Rather than exploring different paths and using trial and error, one is advised to take up the most fitting for oneself and go deep in it.

The broad categories of the paths in Hinduism seem to be fairly exhaustive, encompassing intellect, will and emotion, the three most widely recognized and really major aspects of the human personality. Lao Tzu was a true individualist and did not want to lay down a general path. But Hinduism, though ultimately individualist when it comes to spirituality, recognizes the major aspects of human personality and comes up with a limited number of major paths. Of course, human ingenuity ranges far and wide. Hence, a sage may arrive on the scene to declare new viable path or paths. Also, the alleys like *laya-yoga, kundalini-yoga, hatha-yoga* and the like can be subsumed under the four main paths and are, therefore, not discussed by, for instance, the authentic texts like the *Bhagavad-gita.*

It does not mean that you have to do the same thing on every path, though. You yourself have to tread your chosen path or the path shown by your guru. And, boy, do people walk differently? Is there only one way to love God, taking the path of devotion for example? One can improvise endlessly and discover creative nuances and pass them on if one becomes a guru. All aspirants have or develop their own style or gait. Say, Sanskriti and I are on the path of devotion and are singing bhajans, the Hindu devotional songs. Sanskriti will sing very beautifully, a hundred times better than what I will do. But it is possible that our love for God may not be that far apart in depth or intensity.

Sanskriti: Sevakji, I will let you accompany me on harmonium to reduce the first distance.

Sevak: I'd be happy to do that, Sanskriti. But, you know, if you start singing classical music, I won't be a good accompanist. I have my limits.

Sanatan: I am still trying to fully absorb Sevakji's thoughts about how the world religions stand in relation to each other. But one thing seems obvious to me. Hinduism is the only religion that has the right integration, balance and comprehensiveness. Maybe it is complex for

that reason, but its complexity is organic and has a reason, method and order behind it. It gives individuals choice. It also gives them guidance. It does not dictate to them. It does not tempt them. It does not threaten them. It utilizes universal elements like intellect, emotion and will. I'd say that it utilizes even more universal element in the path of meditation. That is consciousness, which is the direct target in that path. All other religions focus on one or the other dimension of human personality. Hinduism has use for all of them and it orders them in a sensible way that no other religion does.

Anish: Sevakji, would it be true to say that all non-Hindu religions are lopsided, narrow or immature, compared to the comprehensive, fully developed, well-ordered, organic, holistic and balanced nature of Hinduism? It may sound self-serving but, if it is the truth, it needs to be asserted and proclaimed. Hinduism has itself done a very poor job advertising its own well-deserved merits. No wonder it continues to suffer an underdog status with anyone "criticizing" it with ignorant impunity.

Sevak: Anish, you have a good question and a pertinent observation. Personally, I am very wary of judging anybody's spirituality, let alone the spirituality of an entire religion. Then, most of the major world religions have, over the centuries of development, evolved elements belonging to all the four categories of Hinduism. For example, Buddhism developed devotionalism in its *Maha-yana* forms, especially in China. Some dedicated Christian theologians can be regarded as followers of the path of knowledge in their own ways.

Over many centuries of development a religion is bound to be exposed to all the three dimensions of human personality and thus can be expected to develop features of all the major spiritual paths. Even so, Hinduism seems to be the only religion that recognizes all and places them in a comprehensive framework. Yes, Hinduism has its internecine quarrels. At times followers of one path do not get along with the adherents of another. But, overall, Hindus have done a fairly good job of tolerating, if not always respecting, the differences among the paths. This in itself, compared to rampant intolerance everywhere around, is a strong reason to hold that the plurality of spiritual paths is one defining feature of Hinduism.

The point about self-promotion is quite pertinent. You know Hinduism has never been an aggressive missionary religion. It does not claim exclusive truth. It even tends to see elements of truth in rivals and alternatives. It has an unusual degree of tolerance and respect for other

religions, even when they feign manifest hostility toward it. Some see it as its weakness of will or as lack of self-confidence. There is definitely a spiritual element in keeping a low profile and not tooting one's own tune too loudly. A Christian missionary asked a Hindu living in Indonesia in a Muslim neighborhood as to how he got along with his Muslim neighbors. The Hindu simply replied, "They too worship God; what's the problem?"

Darshana: Sevakji, I want to pick out one point you just made and bring out its relevance to our topic at hand. You said that plurality of spiritual paths is one defining feature of Hinduism. We are trying to define Hinduism and this gives us one way that does the dual job of being an internal feature of Hinduism that at the same time serves to distinguish Hinduism from its counterparts in the world.

Sevak: Good point, Darshana. A few more defining features and we are in business!

Madhyama: We do not seem to need going deeper into *tata-stha lakshana* or external definition, which we have explored effectively already. Let us try the *sva-rupa lakshana* or internal definition.

Sevak: Darshana, what would you regard as principal internal features of world religions on a comparative basis? Maybe we can use those.

Darshana: Sevakji, with my philosophical training, I would identify ethical and metaphysical outlooks as the two broad categories that most world religions manifest. We have already gone through what may be called methodological, epistemological, psychological and spiritual outlooks. We compressed them in the three *pramana*s or means of knowledge and the four *yoga*s or spiritual paths. Maybe now is the time to consider the ethical and metaphysical outlooks of Hinduism. But a bit of comparison with other religions may not be out of place as we do that.

Sanskriti: Darshana, can you briefly elaborate for us the ethical and metaphysical dimensions used by religions? If you will, also preface this with a brief explanation of the terms you just used.

Darshana: I am happy to contribute what I am familiar with. I am picking up a good deal from the group on things not within my purview. So, this is a matter of reciprocating. Let us see. First I will give the general preface to the broad terms I used, like methodology and

epistemology in relation to psychology and spirituality. Then I will give a brief narrative on the ethical and metaphysical dimensions in world religions.

Traditionally philosophy is divided in four broad divisions: logic, epistemology, metaphysics and ethics. While logic and epistemology form the general method, metaphysics and ethics can be called the major outcomes of applying the method. Contemporary logic has aligned itself to mathematics and developed way beyond the old deductive and inductive logics. But it still is the main methodological core in philosophy, defining the valid forms of arguments used to support any outcomes derived in particular philosophical theories. Epistemology deals with the nature and criteria of knowledge, not to speak of the limits and scope of human knowledge. How we know the truth of any statement is a major issue and hence it also is basically a field that lays down the method of arriving at truthful outcome. In my view, there is a general decline in the derivation of outcome and a pointless proliferation in methodology like logic and epistemology in the last few centuries. This trend continues to date, even as I continue to think that it is overdone.

Now let us apply this to the worldwide field of religion. Religions also have their outcomes, which they derive from or support with their method. Very generally, a major outcome in Eastern religion takes the form of enlightenment experience and, in Western religions, closeness to God. Spiritual paths of knowledge and meditation are mainly used as the method to reach enlightenment, while those of devotion and selfless action are generally practiced to reach closeness to God. This is what Sevakji articulated in his narrative of the spiritual paths in world religions.

Madhyama: Darshana, this basic narrative on philosophy is very useful. Thank you. But carry on.

Darshana: Ethics and metaphysics are the major forms that outcome takes in philosophy. Ethics primarily deals with determining what is right and good. Metaphysics seeks to find out what is real as against what is merely apparent. Now, one can go on and on explaining ethics and metaphysics of the different religions. I will cut it short and state very briefly the central points.

Let us look at ethics. In the Western religions ethics comes out prominently as commandments of God. We know the Ten Commandments that God gave to Moses for His people. The Torah or the Ten Commandments comprise the pillars of Jewish ethics.

Christianity has the love of even one's enemies as an added ethical admonition. Christian ethics is also manifested in its belief in heaven and hell, which are the appropriate awards, by God for the ethical, or unethical for that matter, actions of the individuals. Islam has the similar concept of heaven and hell, called *jannat* and *jahannam*.

Confucianism has the concept of the Mandate of Heaven, which applies to the actions of the king, with consequence for his people. The Mandate was differently interpreted through Chinese history. In Daoism, if you do not do things in the natural way, they just do not work out. A stiff plant can be uprooted by strong wind, while grass can bend and survive against it.

In this light, we have to think what would be the comparable Hindu ethics that is accepted by all or nearly all Hindus. If we find something distinctive, it can again serve the dual function as a defining feature both internally and externally.

Madhyama: Hey, folks, what rules do we, as Hindus, want to be governed by?

Darshana: Or, what makes the most ethical sense to us as Hindus? After the introduction of the Christian God the West for a long time thought, both in philosophy and religion, that life would have no ethical meaning without God. It took Nietzsche to declare God as dead and seek to make meaning of life without God. But it has been a struggle there.

Sevak: I think Darshana knows the answer. I do too. But this time let us hear it from the group.

Sanskriti: You professors are going to tease us a bit?

Anish: At least to me the authoritative ways of a commanding God do not seem to be even ethically attractive, let alone the basis of meaning for life. How do others feel?

Sanskriti: I do not see how a God that issues commands without explaining their rationale can sway me ethically, either.

Mahila: Mira's God, Krishna, was an embodiment of love and would not issue any commandments. At the end of the *Bhagavad-gita* he asks Arjuna to consider what he, Krishna, said and then to do what he, Arjuna, thinks fit.

Darshana: Personally, looking at the Christian heaven, I do not feel that I can do enough good in my whole life to deserve to spend an eternity in heaven. So, it looks like a huge handout, a tempting ploy. I would not bid for that. The idea of eternal hell is even worse. I cannot do enough evil in my whole life to deserve such a most cruel and unusual punishment.

Madhyama: Darshana, I am with you on that. I also feel the same as other women in the group. A big stick and a big carrot are not my idea of ethical fairness. Both the reward and punishment are excessive. I see no sense of proportion or balance in the proposition.

Anish: It makes sense to me that God would love us, as Christianity prefers. Yet, I do not know how to convert that into an ethical sense. Just rewarding people with heavenly pleasures seems crass, materialistic and hedonistic for my taste. What is the big bribe for? A reward for learning the right name of God? Give me a break. And I do not see God of infinite love being violent in any way, to punish anyone for any reason, let alone being so intolerant as to punish mere dissent with eternal death in hell. A monster would have a better heart. How can such a philosophy give people meaning of life for so many centuries?

Navin: My sentiments are with Anish on this, although I won't use as much harshness.

Sanatan: I am with Anish totally on this. He was harsh but he spoke the truth. I do not want to dignify this so-called ethics with a response.

Sevak: I do not see anybody in the group going for the Western religious ethics. But let us recognize that we spared the Ten Commandments as an ethical code. I think there are attractive ethical features there. If we feel that life is meaningful, what would give it meaning, other than heaven for being ethical and hell for being unethical?

Sanskriti: I think our criticism is directed toward the motivation behind heaven and hell and toward the excessiveness of both reward and punishment. If the motivation is strictly ethical, namely rewarding the good and punishing the evil, it would not draw as much negativity as the motivation, which, as Anish put it, is no more than learning the "right" name of God.

Mahila: And, of course, the excessiveness of rewards and punishments is beyond comprehension.

Darshana: St. Augustine, a pioneer Christian philosopher, said something relevant to the matter of excessiveness. He said that the point of being in Heaven is not having material pleasures so much as being able to see God face to face. Then he brought up the point of saints and others that performed outstanding good deeds deserving more than those who just made, for instance, no more than an honest buck. He resolved the issue by saying that in the heavenly assemply those who deserved more would have a closer and better view of God than others.

Anish: Such face-saving dodge is called philosophy?

Darshana: Retrospectively, historians of philosophy in the modern age and later had a hard time with much of medieval philosophy. Many shied away from labeling a great deal of the theological work as philosophy. But the tremendous influence, clout and pressure from Christianity succeeded in making the historians recognize philosophical elements in the theological work. So, you will usually find entire chapters devoted to St. Augustine and St. Aquinas, for example, in standard histories of philosophy. Incidentally, I found the above text by Augustine quoted in a textbook on the history of ethics.

Anish: It is interesting that the same philosophical establishment in the West, which allows entire chapters on medieval theology in the history of philosophy, would not have even a word on, for example, Hindu logical system of Nyaya philosophy. Some logical and rational philosophers!

Darshana: A great deal of Eurocentric chauvinism pervades the Western philosophical establishment. Any way, I am sorry to distract the group. I could not just pass up the interesting feature in Augustine that seemed very relevant.

But a word of caution. Eurocentrism and chauvinism do not imply wholesale rejection of Western philosophy, its tradition and its universal issues. I will by no means advocate throwing the baby away with bath water, even if the baby is very dirty! That is why you saw me mention the four divisions of philosophy and enunciate the issue of stipulative as against descriptive definition. It's Western philosophy that brought out these universally significant features of intellectual issues. Let's give credit where credit is due and reserve our right to criticism where

criticism is due. By the way, this applies to Eastern thought and Hinduism too.

Sevak: Right on, Darshana! There is a legitimate need and consequent room for relativism, but I won't let relativism swallow truth and reality wholesale either. A fair amount of truth and reality may be claimed by reasonable universalism, especially if the latter can muster good reasons to support it.

Sanskriti: It seems to me that all this is significant even if tangential to the core points of our discussion. But it is time to get back on track. I was saying that what was unacceptable ethically in the story of eternal heaven and hell was the crass excessiveness of reward and punishment.

Mahila: Yes, provided again that the reward and punishment clearly and specifically relate to actual ethical and unethical deeds and are not meted out for just belief and dissent.

Madhyama: What we are saying is that ethical sense comes from reciprocal and proportionate consequences following from the acts. What we are talking about is *karma*.

Darshana: Finally! The group figured it out, Sevakji.

Sevak: Yes, we got it.

Sanskriti: I somehow like this being teased out of us rather than spoon-fed. We should not make it a habit to ask Sevakji for every bit of knowledge. We should try to think for ourselves first as much as we can.

Madhyama: I agree. I am struck by the tease. It feels like a self-rediscovery. Wow! *Karma* makes such immediate ethical sense. I wonder why it did not occur to the Western religions.

Darshana: Because if you require proportional consequences to preserve ethical sense, you will need reincarnation to experience the consequences not yet meted out in this life at the time of death. Reincarnation, as you know, is anathema to Western religions. According to them, there is only one life.

Anish: Shows how millions of people can compromise their ethical sense and integrity to accommodate a mere dogma of one life to live. Shows

how little faith they have in ethics. No wonder they have to look to God to magically give meaning to life.

Sanatan: This shows that the law of *karma* is the only way that sense can be made of ethical life.

Navin: If an alternative to *karma* exists that makes greater sense of ethical life, I would like to know about it.

Sevak: Let us go deeper in the theory of *karma* to formulate it with clarity and precision and state what makes it so sensible compared to its alternatives in other religions. *Karma* has detracting interpretations and even abuses that we cannot regard as ethically central. We will bypass them. At the same time, let us note that *karma* is common to Hinduism, Buddhism and Jainism. So, it may give us an internal defining feature of Hinduism, but it will not work as a feature that distinguishes Hinduism from all other religions.

Darshana: Well, we can't always have features that do double duty.

Sevak: That's true. But, like *karma*, if a feature makes for an essential attribute it is a good candidate for being part of definition.

Darshana: Indeed.

Madhyama: I want to respond to Sevakji's question about what makes *karma* so sensible at a deeper level. Thinking deeper about *karma*, what I find so sensible about it is that it gives everyone both freedom and responsibility. It gives me freedom to do what I like, but makes me responsible for what I actually do. This is how it should be. Freedom without responsibility is mere licentiousness. Responsibility without freedom is a burden arbitrarily imposed without reason. A working and workable blend of freedom and responsibility is the perfect middle way I always prefer.

Anish: Yes, there is no knockout proof for reincarnation. But we are not talking science here. We are talking ethics and the very meaning of life that we can actually live by. We just cannot live by freedom alone or by responsibility alone. *Karma* both combines them and adds a perfect symmetry and proportion to human actions and their consequences.

Darshana: How about the criticism that any punishment is cruel and that, if I am reborn in another culture, the consequence may be very different because morals are relative?

Sanatan: I will speak to the first criticism. A person who wants to evade punishment for an evil he inflicts on an innocent victim and wants to get away is the last person that I will worry about when talking about ethical sense. Ethics is not there to pamper people. It is there to inculcate a sense of responsibility. If a person does not want to own his acts and take responsibility for them, does he belong in any meaningful scheme of life? He should retire in a forest and live at the mercy of lions and tigers. Or, he should crave to be a spoiled brat born to a pampering millionaire. Spoiled brats do not want to learn, they just want to take advantage of others' kindness. If I hurt someone, I will not ask to be excused. I would rather ask for the right, if not the strictest, punishment.

Navin: Reminds me of Mahatma Gandhi who, when tried for breaking an unjust law in a civil disobedience situation, would not offer any defense and ask the judge to inflict the severest punishment on him for the breach of law. And he did serve long prison sentences. That is accepting the highest kind of responsibility for one's acts. It is sheer cowardice to ask for a pat on the wrist, saying that all punishment is cruel.

Sanatan: You got me, Navin. In this particular situation, I agree with Gandhi and applaud his high moral ground. He accepted suffering and punishment even when he was innocent. That sets an example beyond comparison and dramatically drives home the point he was making about the ethical situation that called for civil disobedience action.

Sanskriti: I will speak to the second criticism that Darshana brought to our attention. Suppose an act, such as bigamy, is committed in a culture where it is immoral and the person dies and is reborn in another culture where it is permissible. He should still get the consequences for inflicting pain on his victim that one would get in a relatively comparable case such as, for example, trigamy, if that is not permissible in the new culture. The law of *karma* should be tied to the pleasure or pain caused rather than to abstract rightness or wrongness of actions. In any case, the concept is about taking responsibility for one's actions if the actions hurt others, and about deserving repayment when a debt is incurred. Whatever consequences bring about the discharge of the responsibility or making of the repayment would suffice, without having to entertain casuistic niceties about a quantitative or even a qualitative *quid pro quo*.

The law of *karma* does not operate at the level of human law courts. It is automatic, exact and appropriate by definition. As to what precise form it would take in a particular case to achieve complete propriety is not as consequential as the very concept that not to have responsibility accepted or discharged is unthinkable as an alternative. As Navin said, show me a better alternative, before pouncing on *karma*.

Mahila: The point is that, no significant responsibility is discharged without appropriately significant consequences. If a thief steals your diamond ring, you cannot let him get away with just an apology. He must at least return the ring. You can make an adjustment if you find that he did it to feed his hungry child. Adjustments and allowances on what is appropriate can always be made in light of circumstances and time and place and in light of our limited wisdom. But they cannot in themselves add up to a weight sufficient to overthrow the principle itself, which operates at a level of absolute propriety and divine wisdom. For, to change the metaphor, such an overthrow would amount to the tail wagging the dog quite violently.

Madhyama: While we are on *karma*, I would like to add a few points. All of us seem agreed on the point that eternal heaven and hell as reward and punishment for one life's actions amount to pampering and overkill. The law of *karma* is about fairness and responsibility. It's the most intuitive principle of moral life. It's the idea that fairness prevails and, if humans do not insure it in their behavior, God will. If we commit any excesses in any direction, God will correct that too. If you do not have God, as in Buddhism for instance, it works like a law of nature. I think we are all agreed that *karma* is at the essence of ethical meaning in life. If someone claims to be ethical, the first question to answer is the way responsibility is discharged. If someone does something unethical, are some consequences going to follow or not to discharge the responsibility? Depending on the significance of the action, the consequence has to be equally significant, to match it one on one. If I borrow one thousand from someone, I got to return that amount. Normally, if I do not do it, the law will force me to do it. *Karma* makes sure that it will happen. No one gets away. It will catch up with you, always.

Mahila: Making a miscreant into a victim or accusing *karma* of revengeful attitude is an outrageous dodge to evade legitimate question of fundamental responsibility. Yes, certain societies are at times harsh or even cruel to individuals or groups. They also allow people to get away

with loot and theft, for example. This deserves correction and reform. But the correction or reform itself will have to issue from an ethical stance, which will bring the issue of responsibility back on the burner. *Karma* as the fundamental principle of fairness operates at all levels, saddling everyone with appropriate and proportionate accountability whether it is an individual, group or society.

Sanskriti: As a businesswoman, I will add this. The law of *karma* is an excellent system of incentives for doing good and of disincentives for doing evil. To the extent good and evil are relative, the responsibility will be discharged in a relative way. No one in one's conscience wants to be unfair to another. At least no one wants to be treated unfairly. The only argument one can convincingly offer to support one's desire to be treated fairly is that it is self-evident and intuitive. Only a monstrous brute would just insist on treating another unfairly. A real human won't do that. The question why one should be fair answers itself. By building fairness in the natural world, the law of *karma* validates our most basic ethical intuition and envisages the ideal way it must operate.

Those who criticize *karma* should ponder this. Think of the most ghastly and hence the most unethical action a human can perform. Imagine that somebody commits it wantonly. Now, if you think that it does not matter that no significant consequence may follow this action by way of discharging that person's responsibility, you should think of yourself as the victim of that action. Only an insane person would think that it does not matter if no consequence follows. I bet an average person will jump ten feet if only one-tenth of such action is committed on him and nothing happens to the perpetrator. The empty tea-talk of social victimology happens only at a tea table. The real world in all cultures follows a system of consequences for irresponsible actions. No amount of highbrow intellectuality will wish away the stark reality of *karma* actually operating in the social systems of all cultures in the world as they always have.

Sanatan: Let me add this. I have heard some people saying with a long face that the law of *karma* is an arbitrary and cruel dogma that is indefensible. They also say that the reason why Eastern philosophy and religion say nothing to support it is that it cannot be supported. The reason why no support is articulated for the existence of the sun is that it is plain to everybody that the sun exists. It is intuitively and patently obvious to any seeing person. Any one who has a tiny bit of ethics in his heart sees the point immediately. That includes all the average Joe's of the world. If an ivory tower intellectual is not convinced, let him try to

abolish or even slightly change the law of crimes in his community and see what happens to him. What we just said in support of the law has been overdue in light or rather the darkness of the countertrend spread by some people who live in a self-righteous cocoon of their own making. Is there a society in the world that has abolished its law of crimes? Consequences are always supposed to follow a criminal act as long as rule of law prevails anywhere. And that is the heart of *karma*. Reincarnation follows *karma* like a corollary follows a theorem.

Sevak: Let me move the dialog a little further in some related areas. Reincarnation and even *karma* are not uniformly conceived in different religions and cultures where those beliefs prevail. In the main there are three ideas behind the principles involved. From what we have said on *karma* it is plain that for us it is reciprocal fairness that is at the heart of *karma* and reincarnation. For some it is personal growth rather. They feel that consequences and reincarnation happen in order to help a person to grow and learn. Yet another idea is unfulfilled desires. Some think that those desires in us that remain unfulfilled at the end of life lead us to the appropriate next life. Some yet feel that reincarnation just happens and we have no way of knowing in what species a person will be reborn. Some believe that *karma* is fatalistic and invalid for that reason.

Darshana: You are right, Sevakji, to note that reciprocal fairness is the key concept for us and for Hinduism in general, as far as *karma* and reincarnation are concerned. Personal growth and unfulfilled desires seem linked. They may be a factor in the Hindu view, but they do not have the fraction of the force enjoyed by reciprocal fairness. I may need to grow in a certain way or I may have certain unfulfilled desires. But they do not, *ipso facto,* translate into rights and, much less into real unearned opportunities. When I have responsibilities to discharge, they will take the precedence. When inflicting a sentence on a criminal, no judge or jury even thinks about accommodating the personal growth or unfulfilled desires of the criminal. On the other hand, if something good is due to me, I will get it regardless of whether it fits my personal growth or particular unfulfilled desires.

Sanatan: That was good, Darshana. Let me address the question of fatalism. For one thing, fatalism is seen to be a threat by those who regard wanton freedom as the highest goal or facilitator in life. Hence, the argument comes mostly from the Western culture where everybody wants to talk about freedom but avoid talking about the balancing responsibility that alone can make it both meaningful and desirable. If

anything, *karma* directly speaks to that responsibility and is seen readily as a threat to the lust for freedom, growth and the like that wish to remain immune from any obligation to construct a framework of responsibility. Then, as I said in my self-introduction, I identify myself first of all with the duties I need to perform in the situation in which I find myself. If I am a child, I have to be a good student. As a son, I must look after my ailing parents. If I am a father, I must look after my children well. As a neighbor, I must participate in the community. All that is my identity.

My own desires and the so-called freedom to fulfill them are relegated as the storehouse of my personal *vasana*s or driving impressions left from my *karma* in previous lives. After fulfilling my obligations, if I have time, I can get to them in a way that is properly restrained in view of others that can be affected. I must discharge my own base inclinations in the most responsible manner. In any case, they do not have priority. The obligations of my situation have priority. They are not just my priority; they are to be my identity. To the Western mind used to being pampered by licentious freedom, this would sound terribly limiting of my potential and growth. To me, and I submit to the Hindus, the situation in which I am placed and the obligations emanating from it *are* my growth and potential to realize.

I also submit that the craze for individual freedom and its nefarious consequences for family and community are not even the original part of Western religions. The so-called Western religions originated in the Middle East, so they are really speaking Eastern religions. As such, they have a good positive sense of duties built into them. No doubt they now talk as if freedom was embedded in them as a birthright of every individual. But Moses did not come down with ten rights of the individuals; he came down with ten obligations of individuals to the community represented by God. Jesus or Mohamed also did not seek to indulge people by inciting in them the need for freedom from needed social restraints. They had the great sense for people following their obligations as the first priority.

Once you meet your obligations, everything left is your freedom, if you will. You can use it within the framework of needed social restraints. That is as much growth as you would need or can work with without getting it to your head. I have some Muslim friends. They all believe in predestination, knowing that Allah knows what anyone is going to be doing in the future. They are not threatened by it. They even feel the highest security and solace in it, with a secure feeling that Allah is with them if they would only do what is needed in the situation in which He has put them. My situation is for me as a Hindu a reflection of my past *karma*. For a Muslim it is the desire of Allah. We both rejoice

in accepting its challenge. We do not endlessly whine about what is not given to us and desperately and feverishly run after it.

Further, as Madhyama said so well earlier, *karma* is the perfectly balanced blend between freedom and responsibility. I am basically free to do my will but I must accept responsibility for whatever I freely choose to do that affects others. If I overstate my *karma* and decide not to do anything to put food on the table, thinking that I will get food if it is in my fate, then I am only restricting my own destiny. *Karma* helps you make your own destiny, if you have the will to do it. I cannot blame *karma* if I do not have the will to make my destiny. *Karma* challenges everyone with the call to make one's own destiny. It is my own weakness of the will to decline the challenge and lie low. Fatalism is not even a part of *karma*. At best it amounts to an abuse of *karma*.

Sevak: Let us resume our dialog on the proper way of defining Hinduism when we meet again for the next session. This was a very productive session where we found more of ourselves. All of us contributed actively and vigorously to the seminar. We made a lot of progress in an avowedly difficult area. I am certain that we will continue this in the next session, which will see us with a good definition or at least a working description of Hinduism. Thank you all for a great session. We will see you next time.

Madhyama: One word on an unfinished agenda before we bid good-bye, Sevakji.

Sevakji: Say it, Madhyama.

Madhyama: Darshana was going to expound on ethical and metaphysical aspects of world religions from which we could distinguish Hinduism in order to help us achieve some defining attributes for Hinduism. She got only the ethical component into us. We still have to hear her on the metaphysical component of world religions leading into the Hindu metaphysics.

Sevak: Good of you to remind us of this unfinished business, Madhyama. *Namas-te*, everyone!

All: *Namas-te*, Sevakji!

SESSION 3:

HINDUISM DEFINED

Sevak: *Om Tat Sat*, everybody. Welcome to the third session of the seminar on Hinduism for Today.

All: *Om Tat Sat*, Sevakji.

Sevak: Let us connect with our last session and plunge right into the subject we are set to discuss in this session. Madhyama, would you like to get us started?

Madhyama: Let me cover briefly what we have done so far. In the first session we introduced ourselves, everyone self-identifying through a single adjective, as to what kind of Hindu he or she saw oneself to be. It was evident that we formed a good cross-section of Hinduism in that we represented widely diverse perspectives from which we approached Hinduism. We learned a lot from the self-introductions. Each of us discovered more about everyone else and also about oneself, having to articulate, clarify and elaborate hir or her Hinduism. We questioned everybody, asking them to provide more details or go deeper into their thoughts. We did not spare Sevakji, our facilitator, whom we questioned the same way we did every other participant.

Sevak: I was questioned even more than others. But, I liked that.

Madhyama: Sevakji, we are the ones who benefited. We are glad that we can bring our questions to you, Sevakji. At the beginning of the second session, we were quite excited, looking forward to building on the first session and constructing a Hinduism for Today that would speak to us, respond to our needs and be relevant to our life's concerns. Knowing Hinduism to be a complex and vast affair, we expected to see clearly how the question of defining Hinduism has eluded a viable answer. We proceeded quite logically, though, confronting the very idea of definition to throw possible light on our question. Darshana showed us how a definition has to strike a delicate balance between stipulation and description. Sevakji explained how in Hindu philosophy a *lakshana* or definition should avoid *avyapti* or insufficient coverage and *ativyapti* or excessive coverage. This led us into examining the sources of Hinduism, of which we identified four: *shruti* or primary scripture, *smriti* or

secondary scripture, *itihasa* or the history tradition and *purana* or the cosmology tradition.

Sevak: I am sorry, Madhyama, but I must interject something important here. In identifying the prime sources of Hindism we talk about the four classic sources you mentioned. But there also exists another vast source especially at the popular level that we should mention. It is known as *Sant Sahitya* or the poetry, sayings and writings by saints like the Alvars, Bauls, Dadu, Eknath, Ganga-sati, Kabir, Mira, Narsinh, Purandara-dasa, Ramdas, Surdas, Tulsidas, Tukaram, Tyaga-raja and many others. They contribute an elevated intensity at the devotional level and, though deriving mainly from the prime four sources, occasionally burst out in beautiful insights. Their appeal to the masses is enormous, even though their conceptual content is largely derived from the prime four. Madhyama, please continue.

Madhyama: Thank you for that edification, Sevakji. We saw no need to exclude any of the four classic sources. Including such a vast literature seemed like committing the fallacy of *ativyapti* or excessive coverage. Hence, we sought principles to narrow our focus. Sevakji told us about the Hindu traditional use of *sva-rupa lakshana* or internal definition and *tata-stha lakshana* or external definition. We began to explore the external definition as a preliminary to finally achieving a good internal definition of Hinduism.

We traversed far and wide into the basics of Eastern and Western philosophy and religions, comparing them and reflecting on them in relation to Hinduism. We noted similarities as well as differences between the Hindu and non-Hindu philosophy and religions. It was seen that Hinduism differed from others in relying on a composite rather than a simple standard. Particularly, the three *pramana*s or means of knowledge and the four *yogas* or spiritual paths were brought out as a distinguishing feature of Hinduism, especially the set of four yogas. It was also seen that the concept of *arsha-pratyaksha* or sages' direct perception served to unite the four different paths. In any case, the four paths did the double duty of serving as a defining internal feature as well as a distinctive feature of Hinduism. Darshana pointed out that all this amounted to looking at the epistemological, spiritual, psychological and methodological aspects of Hinduism.

She then asked us to look at ethical and metaphysical features of Hinduism in order to identify more defining features, warning that we may not always be fortunate to find ones that did double duty. We began looking for salient but widely shared ethical principles of Hinduism and,

lo and behold, we found a great consensus among ourselves. *Karma*, or the law of reciprocal fairness as we called it, was found to be not only the Hindu bearer of ethics but also a necessary feature of meaning for ethical life. We critically assessed rival viewpoints and their criticisms of the law of *karma*. Blending freedom and responsibility was one attractive feature of *karma*. Particularly, everyone agreed that *karma* as conceived by us easily towered above all its alternatives. It clearly seemed to be the most pervasive ethical feature of all cultures and an actual and necessary foundation of ethical life and its meaning. It is tacitly presupposed in all social transactions and has been axiomatic in all criminal justice systems. It does not exhaust Hindu ethics, but it is gratifying to note that Hinduism assigns it a place of pride in its world picture.

Mahila: Madhyama, I am glad you said that *karma* does not exhaust Hindu ethics. For, there is much more to Hindu ethics.

Darshana: That's right, Mahila.

Madhyama: So, there we are. The next step is to continue our search for a good definition of Hinduism by identifying more features that together will define Hinduism and also distinguish it from its counterparts. Especially, we should embark on the metaphysical features of world religions and view them in relation to their counterpart in Hinduism. I suppose Darshana should start leading us in this effort.

Darshana: Excellent job, Madhyama. You just did a great summary of both the preceding sessions.

Madhyama: Thank you, professor! I feel good getting the passing grade from you.

Navin: I want to concur with Darshana. I commend Madhyama highly for providing a very perspicuous summary of our discussions. Being an activist . . .

Sanskriti and Mahila: Not so fast . . .

Navin: I am happy to acknowledge that I am not the only activist in the group. Any way, I have been talking to all in the group here and want to say this on behalf of everybody. It's a real joy to be here, participating in these proceedings. It goes without saying that our knowledge of Hinduism and cognate fields has increased significantly. And we have

just begun! We all feel we've learned a great deal about each other. More importantly, it feels as if we are getting to know ourselves better and deeper rather than just told what to do and how to think. We appreciate being in such a congenial environment where we can speak our mind without fear and discuss Hinduism in a free and open manner. We are clearly headed toward learning a lot about how best we can improve our thinking and, eventually, life by deepening our grasp of Hinduism. In sum, we already feel like being a family, not just a community, of friends.

Mahila: I wholeheartedly support what Navin said. I know that he reflects the sentiments shared by everyone here. We find ourselves growing amicably through this seminar.

Sevak: I want to thank all of you for being here and making this seminar possible. I am confident that it will be similarly effective as well in our life. I trust its positive impact will stretch beyond this group.

Madhyama: Thank you, Sevakji, for initiating us and making this discourse possible.

Darshana: What a great feeling, even for a philosopher! I want to add this. Some of us may burst into mini-lectures from time to time, spurred by occasions that call for them. These can be overwhelming when they occur. But please think carefully about them and consider them seriously. Then bring your questions here, so that we can earnestly review the substance of the statements contained in the mini-lectures. On all matters, in general, feel free to bring your comments. Sevakji does not exact a servile loyalty like a stereotypical guru. Nor does he want to be a kind of guru who just dishes out readymade food on a silver platter.

Sevak: I would rather want each of you to cook it in your own way and to your own taste! Sure, we can learn from each other some creative ways of cooking. Just some more food for thought!

Anish: As we cook, Sevakji, we may make mistakes. We may revise our recipes. We may create our own recipes. Or, we may continue relishing our old recipes. I am enjoying this cordial atmosphere here, which makes me feel at home. I hope, however, that we will stay this friendly even when we do not find a great consensus as we did on *karma*.

Sanskriti: Anish is right. We are not always going to agree on everything. Let us agree to disagree agreeably when that happens.

Sevak: Agreed! I do not foresee preaching to a converted choir all the time. I rather look forward to being challenged all the way so that what we come out with will be that much tested and stronger.

Darshana: Let us see if there are any questions at this point before we pick up from where we left off in the last session.

Sanatan: At one point I heard it being said that we, or maybe Sevakji, will be doing philosophy of Hinduism here. I wonder if Darshana can elucidate how that would be the same as or different from Hindu philosophy.

Darshana: A good question, Sanatan. It is important to note the difference between Hindu philosophy on the one hand and philosophy of Hinduism on the other. Hindu philosophy, by tradition, is specifically contained in the six systems of Hindu philosophy. They are called *Nyaya* or logical realism, *Vaisheshika* or atomistic pluralism, *Sankhya* or rational distinctionism, *Yoga* or spiritual unionism, *Mimamsa* or Vedic ritualism and *Vedanta* or spiritual integralism. The dominant system is *Vedanta* and it divides into half a dozen subsystems. Sorry for some neologism here . . .

Sanskriti: Quite intriguing new terms. Off hand, I recognize *Yoga* and *Vedanta*.

Navin: Yes, those two stand out for me too.

Sanatan: I want to hear Darshana state how philosophy of Hinduism is different from these six orthodox systems of Hinduism.

Darshana: Philosophy of Hinduism is to be systematic reflection on the central features of Hinduism. As such, it overlaps with basic statements of the six systems, which it considers and reflects on. It does not restate the statements in the six systems, though. Its job is to reflect and comment on them in a way that will elicit a systematic and comprehensive theory about the central features of Hinduism. Many of these features would be contained in the six, but some may not be.

In philosophy there is an area called philosophy of religion, which does similar thing to religion as we will do to Hinduism here. In theistic

religions such attempt takes the form of theology. For instance, philosophy of Christianity is basically Christian theology. Philosophy of Hinduism, differently, is not just theology for the reason that *Brahman* or the ultimate spiritual reality in Hinduism often evinces features different from those of a personal God.

Mahila: So, it appears as if a lot will depend on what are considered to be the central features of Hinduism to start with. That comes back to the definition of Hinduism.

Darshana: Very true, Mahila. Achieving a good definition of Hinduism is job one in philosophy of Hinduism. Reflection on the elements contained in the definition is the next job. Seeing to it that the reflection amounts to a well-ordered comprehensive theory or system will be the ultimate goal of a good philosophy of Hinduism. During this process, philosophy of Hinduism may selectively wander into the six systems, especially *Vedanta*, and explore much more, like developing a core of method in terms of logic and epistemology and articulating the outcome in terms of ethics and metaphysics. Or, I may be dreaming a philosophical utopia; at least I'd like us not to bypass philosophy in our explorations.

Remember that Sevakji talked about a philosophy of Hindu thought and spirituality rather than just a philosophy of Hinduism. So, exploring the spiritual paths and integrating them with the basic values of life in Hindu thinking is appropriate to the goal of the seminar. Comparing with alternative ways of understanding Hinduism and with alternatives to the central features of Hinduism in the global field may occur.

Sevak: All this is appropriate, relevant and legitimate for the seminar. But, realistically, the limited time we have may not let us accomplish it all. We should be content, however, if we lay a good foundation for it to occur in the minds of the participants who may find their own links to follow in their life for the future.

Anish: This helps clarify the seminar's objectives as a whole. Should we be going deeper into the four sources we spoke of earlier?

Darshana: Yes, broadly speaking, along with relevant features of non-Hindu philosophies and religions. Following what Sevakji said, I'd limit them to short excursions when context demands it. To go deeper in an exhaustive manner would require a number of seminars.

Sanskriti: I am as circumspect as Sevakji on whether we will be able to do all this. Looks like a serious ambition to me. But it would be greatly worthwhile if we can pull it off.

Darshana: Yes, it promises to be a serious and desirable undertaking. We will do what we can, Sanskriti.

Sanskriti: It is exciting. Let's do all we can.

Sevak: It is challenging, intriguing and, I certainly hope, enjoyable.

Navin: Hinduism for Today, indeed.

Sanatan: What I like about the project is that it does not require us to be critical of Hinduism just to prove our objectivity.

Anish: What I like about it is that it does not have to be a rubber stamp of Hinduism either.

Darshana: We will consider all major aspects of the matter that occur to us. We will seek to arrive at a comprehensive philosophy that can serve the needs of different persuasions within Hinduism without being terribly incoherent. What do you say, Sevakji?

Sevak: You are right, Darshana. I am afraid, though, that we may not be able to please every faction of Hinduism. Nor should we just want to. The idea is to be accurate within the spirit of Hinduism and be faithful to the heart of Hinduism. We will wade into the parts and details but will not lose sight of the whole or the center. We want to feel like being a part of the whole rather than being confused and torn. It's about time that someone or some group did this, namely, philosophy of Hinduism, that is, philosophy of Hindu thought and spirituality. Why not us?

Madhyama: I see that we are already doing it. If achieving a good definition of Hinduism, which thinkers have had a hard time doing, is job one, we have already embarked upon it and, I feel, are on our way to getting there. Let us push more and move toward a good definition or at least a viable working description. Our undertaking is greatly ambitious for a single seminar any way.

Sevak: Yes, Madhyama. I see no other hands up for more questions. Let *us get going.* Darshana to start us or rather help us resume where we left off last time.

Darshana: Having identified the ethical core of Hinduism, not to be confused with all of ethics that Hinduism has to offer, we want to move on to identify the metaphysical core of Hindu experience. I was going to say "Hindu belief," but I corrected myself and said "Hindu experience."

Sanatan: That was commendable, Darshana, because, unlike some other religions, it is experience rather than belief that is characteristic of Hinduism.

Darshana: Yes, if belief has a place in Hinduism, it is not as prominent as in other religions. Belief, at best, counts just among the first few steps in a long spiritual journey, as far as Hinduism is concerned. For most religions, and very strikingly so, God is at the core of belief. The existence of God is a central feature for them. Almost everything else goes around it.

Anish: But, Darshana, God is conceived in amazingly diverse ways and it may be misleading to say that it is always about one fixed concept.

Darshana: There are varying concepts of God, no doubt. And, as an atheist you will hasten to add that there are religions, not to speak of philosophies, where God is absent from their ontology or overall structure of existence.

Sanskriti: Darshana, if ontology deals with the overall structure of existence, how is metaphysics different from it? I suppose we are here concerned about the metaphysical core of Hinduism.

Darshana: Thanks for the question, Sanskriti. I am sorry; I should have explained both metaphysics and ontology. "Metaphysics" is a term that is used to denote the systematic study of reality as a whole. Traditionally, it is divided into ontology, cosmology and rational psychology. Ontology deals with the structure of reality. Cosmology is concerned with the nature of the universe, including its origin. It also is concerned with God as a possible creator of the universe. Rational psychology is now no more, for psychology separated from philosophy, the last of the disciplines to do so, at the turn of the twentieth century.

But a sub-discipline called "philosophy of mind" has taken its place in philosophy.

Recent usage tends to run ontology and metaphysics together, with philosophy of mind pursued as a semi-independent area of philosophy. Being independent-minded and not swayed by the contemporary frolics of philosophy, ontology is still a branch of metaphysics in my books. I also regard it as the crucial branch. As such, it has a great overlap but not identity with metaphysics.

Sanskriti: Now I see why ontology and metaphysics are occasionally interchangeable.

Darshana: Sorry for the confusion. Philosophy, at least the way I do philosophy, prides itself on clarity. So, I am going to be embarrassed by lack of clarity whenever it shows up in my statements and thought. Please keep me straight by asking about and pointing out anything that is not clear enough. I am human and all philosophers are human too. Despite all our efforts, some vagueness creeps in from time to time. But we will be always vigilant to drive it off as much as we can and whenever we detect it. Of course clarity is not enough and when it is unattainable we should be clear about it!

Sevak: I appreciate the way you do philosophy, Darshana. It is sincere, honest, sharp and profound. I stand to learn a lot from it.

Sanskriti: What I like about Darshana's approach to philosophy is that it does not claim to have a monopoly on truth. It is open and invites everybody to participate in its process. Then it leaves people to make their own decisions. Of course, no philosophical judgment comes easy and cheap. It costs a lot of hard thinking to arrive at one. I am glad Darshana is with us to help us out when intellectuality is needed.

Madhyama: We need intellectuality in the matters of definition. I would like Darshana to continue on her statement on the metaphysical core of Hindu experience.

Darshana: Many thanks for understanding. Philosophers are not the easiest to understand. But they owe others explanation of just what they are doing.

The way Hinduism has experienced reality is not identical with how most other religions have hypothesized it. Other religions for the most part place some kind of divinity at the core of their worldview. It can be

one God who can be male or female. Or it can be many gods. It can be a creator God, a supervisor God or both. It may be a transcendent God or an immanent God. A transcendent God stays above the universe and humans. Immanent God dwells within the universe and human hearts. One-god view is called monotheism. Many-gods view is called polytheism. World-is-God view is called pantheism. God-is-both-within-and-beyond view is called panentheism. The view that there is only one reality at the core of the world is called monism. The view that this reality is matter is called materialism. The view that it is mind is called idealism. The view that there is one spiritual reality behind the universe should be called spiritual monism.

Where does Hinduism stand in this schema? Seeing many apparent gods in Hinduism the temptation is to call it polytheistic. However, it would be erroneous, just like calling Christianity polytheistic because of its belief in the Trinity of Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Albeit mystically, but they are one, for Christianity. Similarly, the apparent gods in Hinduism are just that, namely, apparent. So, what is the reality behind the gods in Hinduism? A pioneer Orientalist called Max Muller coined the term "henotheism" to denote the Hindu view of gods. It is that whenever a Hindu worships a god, he tends to extol and raise him to the level of the highest God. This, too, amounts to scratching the surface, albeit bit more vigorously. It does not go much beyond the appearance to unearth the deeper and real truth. Again, apply it to Christianity and you will see its folly instantly. When a Christian worships Jesus as Christ, does he extol and raise him to the level of Father God? Son God is not "raised" to the level of Father God. The Son is ultimately one with the Father. A similar but not identical view applies to Hinduism, although exclusivist Christians who see Christ as "unique" may not extend their charity to another religion.

Sanskriti: The matter seems pretty obvious to me. All it takes is to ask an educated and articulate Hindu who can explain what he or she is doing with the apparent plurality of gods. Henotheism looks like a distortion of Hindu view.

Sanatan: Not too many approach Hinduism in order to really understand it in depth. The so-called social scientists like to take pictures of old poor illiterate Hindu women worshiping Ganesh at their home shrines or the *tulsi* plant in their front yards. And this only with a view to making a quantum jump to the conclusion that it is animism, polytheism, pantheism, nature worship, henotheism or one of many meaningless labels they fill their "professional" journals with.

Darshana: It is true that to a practicing Hindu these "isms" have no explanatory value. But the professional literature in social science journals valorizes the labels as "explaining" what is just photographed. Of course, illiterate or semi-literate folks are unable to articulate or will easily misarticulate in face of the leading questions posed by the field workers. This apparently corroborates their misjudgments.

Sanatan: Why does it not occur to these pseudo-scientists to do the same thing to the Western religions where a cross or other sacred artifacts are part of ritual worship?

Darshana: If they do that, they will issue forth in a wordy articulation about the symbolism or deeper meaning behind the artifact involved. And these are highly educated people. If you ask even an illiterate Hindu about the cross in a Christian church, he or she is unlikely to be disrespectful of it.

Sanatan: True. It shows that illiterate Hindus have a thing or two to teach apparently educated but spiritually illiterate Western or Westernized social scientists.

Anish: Although I am not convinced about the existence of God or gods, I see the transparency of the point, which comes across clearly. What this amounts to is an abuse of scientific attitude. One does not need to enter into the politics of the situation, which is a whole different ball game all the same.

Navin: I would like Darshana to bring to conclusion her statement about the metaphysical core of the Hindu experience.

Sanskriti: I started this seeming detour by observing that it would be obvious what the Hindu is feeling if only he or she is asked properly. So, I feel responsible to say what it is that is obvious. Of course, I am not as intellectually trained and accomplished as Darshana or Sevakji. So, what I say may need some polish. Still, it is my responsibility to say it in my average person's terms.

Mahila: Say it, Sanskriti. We need to hear it from you. Yours will be a true authentic voice that detractors will not be able to drown in their jargon-filled verbiage of "isms."

Sanskriti: Here goes. There is not a lot of difference in the level of spiritual experience of an old illiterate woman worshiping a *tulsi* plant and an ostensibly educated woman worshiping a *shaligram* at her elaborate and expensive *puja* room in her house. I see both almost every day. The serene and joyful expression on their face and the way they articulate their feelings to a confidant like me tells all. Their hearts are full of love for a being that cannot be described. At the same time they feel the love of that being deep in their hearts. This mutual exchange of love is accompanied and enhanced by a deep sense of automatic and spontaneous entrustment of all worldly cares to this ineffable infinite being that is felt at the core of all existence. When either woman comes out of her ritual, she is rejuvenated and is ready to tackle her daily chores and tasks with a smile on her face. I am not saying that every Hindu woman has this every morning. But if you watch her closely you get the unmistakable feeling as to what keeps her going through an arduous life regardless of whether she is rich or poor, learned or inarticulate. If she thought that all she was doing was dipping into a social scientist's or orientalist's jargon bag, she would not have this inspirational uplift that the jargon-bag holder will probably never have and so will never understand.

Anish: Very powerfully and forcefully put, Sanskriti. I am touched. I can understand my own mother better now. All through my valorizing of the scientific method, I had always felt that there is a depth beyond stones and plants that Hindus worship. When a scientist holds an advanced silicon chip in hand, the feeling of what the chip can do can be overpowering. The chip as a piece of matter does not do that in the hands of someone innocent of the science involved. Here we are talking about spontaneous spirituality, which comes habitually to these women regardless of their socioeconomic status. It does not come from a creedal dogma, however well propagandized. The pseudo-scientists should be worshiping these women instead of their jargon!

Sevak: Well said, Anish. Sanskriti did extremely well, too. I think we need to draw a distinction between scientism-free genuine science and prejudice-ridden pseudo-science that claims to be the voice of science. We also need to distinguish between spirituality that is deeply felt, regardless of where it occurs, and religion that is not much more than a set of beliefs coming from an institutionalized power structure.

Sanatan: I want to commend both Sanskriti and Anish for giving voice to an untold number of our mothers and sisters who are more deeply

spiritual than many who profess high belief, either in science or religion. It may come to you as a surprise, but I want to add this. What Sanskriti has said is true not only of Hindu women but also of Jewish, Christian, Muslim, Buddhist, Jain, Sikh, Daoist and Confucian women. It is also true of thousands of tribal and aboriginal women who are denigrated by sundry anthropologists and creedal dogmatists. I myself may have castigated some in the past, but in the light of what Sanskriti said and Anish echoed, I now understand millions of mothers and sisters better now.

Darshana: I appreciate this extension to other faiths, especially as it comes out of an ostensive conservative Hindu. It speaks the world about the Hindu form of conservatism.

Navin: I agree that many mothers and sisters belong in this hallowed category of deep spontaneous spirituality. But I do not wish to deprive some fathers and brothers. Maybe their number is small, as Mahila may aver. Women, overall, have held up "religion" better than men, as is often said. This gives it a deeper and fresh meaning. It is the natural spiritual strength that women have over men. But, please, do not exclude all men.

Mahila: Navin, I will allow in this hallowed category, as you well put it, at least all men who are spiritual feminists. What Sanskriti said brings out what Mira set by her life example. What is clear, anyway, is that spirituality cannot be a monopoly of a creedal dogma. Its level and quality are marked by actual experience and they do not need a certification from pseudo-scientists, orientalists or religious dogmatists of any ilk.

Sevak: Do we have another mighty consensus emerging, similar to *karma*? What do you say, Darshana?

Darshana: Sevakji, that's a very pertinent question. Looks like we have a hidden consensus that needs articulation. Let me try to articulate it in, if I might be excused, my little jargon-filled language of philosophy. It will also let me complete what I was developing as the metaphysical core of the Hindu experience. One aspect of the metaphysical core at the heart of the Hindu experience is what Sanskriti called an ineffable infinite being with whom humans can exchange love and one that is felt at or rather as the core of existence. It matters not whether the trigger for the spiritual experience of it is a stone, plant, river, a crucifix or any

artifice held to be sacred for that very reason. When sacredness is institutionalized, it is deprived of its home base. Again, one cannot say that institutionalized situations cannot lead to spiritual experience, although incidence of it is palpably reduced because of the artificial boundaries in which it is imprisoned.

Most importantly, however, what we are talking about is an ineffable, infinite, spiritual being at the core of all existence. Hinduism has no monopoly on it but, again, as in the case of *karma*, it is eminently celebrated in Hinduism. Because the experience is the same uplifting, joy giving and inspiring serenity that penetrates the outer layers of worldly existence, the varieties of trigger should not be mistaken for it itself. Nor should a particular trigger be regarded as the only possible trigger, however frequent and familiar its occurrence. Just as no limit is set to the vastness of the spiritual being no limit can be set to the forms through which it can emerge for any human being. The proof of the pudding is in the eating and not just in the looks. Actual spiritual experience of upliftment and serenity is the real key to its quality and depth. Hinduism enshrines and celebrates this being and stands for it, according it the central place in its metaphysics. Sevakji, can you take this further into textual authentication?

Sevak: Ineffability of the ultimate being is clearly expressed in the famous Upanishadic text that describes the ultimate as *neti neti*, meaning "not this, not that." In Western theology it is called *via negativa*. The idea is that our language, thought and their categories are unable to capture the ultimate, which, then, has to be called ineffable. Of course, there is a paradox in saying that it is beyond what can be said. Those who experience it or see the point do not dwell on the paradox as a roadblock. An example is to the point. The Buddha was often asked about the paradox of having the desire to reach desirelessness. He said he would discontinue recommending the desire if a way can be found to desirelessness without desiring it. He called himself a spiritual physician.

Navin: It's like Mahatma Gandhi calling himself a practical idealist.

Sevak: A good insight, Navin. The point is that the paradox is dwarfed by the depth and closeness gained, along with peace, serenity and bliss. Of course, more advanced aspirants get closer to the ineffable ultimate. It's a great blessing to have a spontaneous access to the ultimate.

Mahila: Can I get you to be a spiritual feminist, Sevakji? You will have that access.

Sevak: No, thanks, Mahila! I am condemned to earn it the hard way! But I do have my moments of bliss, which I do not think are earned or deserved. I pay you my dues by respecting spiritual feminism. Maybe for my next life I will get a promotion and will be a woman.

Mahila: Be careful, Sevakji; you may get your wish!

Navin: Remember Gandhiji wished for being an untouchable in next life so that he would experience oppression firsthand and be able to understand victimhood better.

Sevak: I am not that advanced! Not yet, any way. And I am taking Mahila's advice to not wish it!

Darshana: I am going to rescue Sevakji from the Mahilain and Navinian tortures. Sevakji, you may continue on your assignment!

Sevak: Thanks, Darshana. Now, *neti neti* or the Hindu *via negativa* is of course no way to define the ultimate. It is in fact an abdication of definition. But at the cost of being paradoxical, Hinduism goes ahead to do the twin definitions of the ultimate. We know the twins by now: *sva-rupa lakshana* or the internal definition and *tata-stha lakshana* or the external definition. As we did with Hinduism itself, let's take the external definition first. The second *sutra* or aphorism in the famous and authoritative *Brahma-sutra* goes like this: *janmadyasya yatah.* It means, the ultimate is that from which the origin, sustenance and dissolution of the universe proceed.

Brahma-sutra, authored by the sage Badarayana, is one of the three authoritative texts of *Vedanta* philosophy. The other two texts are the *Upanishads*, which are part of the *shruti* or the primary scripture, and the *Bhagavad-gita*, which is the prime secondary scripture. As we know by now, *Vedanta* is by far the most widely accepted philosophy in Hinduism. It calls the ultimate by the name *Brahman*, which means that whose nature it is to expand. It can be taken to mean that, when you approach it, your identity or inner reach will keep expanding until it achieves the size of the ultimate, that is, infinity.

Darshana: Sevakji, that is a very insightful meaning of *Brahman*. I never heard it before.

Sevak: Thank you for liking it, Darshana. It shows I do not always come up with bad ideas. There are about six different sub-schools of Vedanta and they all accept this external definition of *Brahman*, that the ultimate is the cause of the world. Within Hindu philosophy opinions differ on the nature of causation. Change is the wider concept, of which causation is an example. Some argue that causal change is unreal, calling it *vivarta* or appearance. Their opponents argue that causal change is real. They call it *parinama* or transformation. There are important consequences of either view.

Madhyama: Sevakji, what is your choice? Or, rather, I should ask which one represents Hinduism?

Sevak: Madhyama, after listening to both sides, you may make your own choice. I would offer, in any case, that it would be seriously surgical to raise either view as "truly Hindu." Both are equally Hindu. My own inclination is to use a framework that would make both possible. You can be creative about this and come up with your own different framework. The framework I prefer, without claiming that it is the only possible or the most desirable framework, is to regard the whole world of our perception as borrowing its reality, such as it has, from the ultimate. Hence, it is the ultimate that keeps it in existence. If its support is removed, anything that we see to be existing would cease to exist. This framework allows a follower of *vivarta* to say that the world of change and effects has no reality of its own. It allows a follower of *parinama* to say that, because the ultimate is not running away, the world we see will always be supported by it and is therefore real and will stay that way.

Darshana: How clever, Sevakji!

Sevak: You learn a few ways as you live, Darshana. One has to make his way around you logicians.

Darshana: I will let you get away this time!

Sevak: Thank you for letting the world exist. It is the ultimate in you that is doing that!

Darshana: Another clever stratagem!

Sevak: I, therefore, tend to dilute the Hindu external definition from its concentrated *vivarta* or *parinama* form and regard it as stating that the

ultimate is always at the back of everything that we see as existing, supporting it from falling into nonexistence, so to say. Any way, it is ineffable in the final analysis and, therefore, is not easily amenable to our categorial preferences. Let me formulate the idea thus: The existence of all that we perceive as existing depends on the independent existence of the ultimate, which is an infinite spiritual being that pervades, supports and exceeds our world. In other words, the existence underlying the universe will stay inaccessible even to our widest categories combined. If this is clear enough, we will turn to internal definition of the ultimate.

Madhyama: Seems the line is clear for an assault on the internal.

Sevak: The internal definition of the ultimate lists three well-known characteristics but regards the three as involving and implying each other and, hence, indicating that the three are really one but appearing to be three depending on our perspective and emphasis.

Sanskriti: I can't wait. What are the three well-known characteristics?

Sevak: They are called *sat, chit* and *ananda* or existence, awareness and joy.

Sanskriti: I have heard of these three very often. But I didn't realize they were attributes of the ultimate. But, if these are its attributes and we can speak of them so easily, whatever happens to the ineffability of the ultimate?

Sevak: Thanks for the cross-examination, Sanskriti. If saying that the ultimate is ineffable is paradoxical, this makes it even more so. The ultimate is bound to generate what to our finite intelligence will appear as paradoxes. The actual experience of the ultimate is said to quell all paradoxes, questions, doubts and uncertainty.

Sanskriti: But, Sevakji, how much self-contradiction can one take? I am not a logician, but I can see a logician's point that we ought not to contradict ourselves if we are to make sense.

Sevak: Darshana, can you rescue me from another torture?

Darshana: Not this time, Sevakji. Sanskriti is pushing a logical point and a philosopher ought to respect that.

Sevak: Me and my bad luck! Sanskriti, what would convince you that a paradox is not all that bad? Were you, for instance, convinced of what the Buddha said about desiring the desireless state?

Sanskriti: The Buddha's answer seemed less vulnerable because it relied on a practical necessity.

Sevak: Well, here they are saying that in practical experience your doubts and questions will disappear. Isn't that sufficient?

Sanskriti: No, Sevakji, because here one paradox is piled upon another. First, one is speaking, with a long face, that no one can speak about the ultimate. Then, before you think further, one is found saying that it has three distinct and also not-so-distinct but easily describable characteristics. What kind of experience can vouch for all this pile of inconsistency?

Sevak: I see that you need an experience to accept inconsistency. It shows that for the Hindu mind, *pratyaksha* or direct perception outweighs *anumana* or inferential reason. But can I also say that *arsha-pratyaksha* or sage's perception outweighs both these?

Sanskriti: I respect the sages, but why would they want to pull my leg? Why do they have to pile contradictions and then ask me to believe in the pile?

Sevak: Any way, experience will go a long way convincing you, right? The Hindu mind will quit arguing a logical point if shown a real experience.

Sanskriti: That's a good way of putting it. If I can experience something, its inconsistency will not bother me. When I am actually experiencing a thing, its inconsistency barks but does not bite. But how can I experience something inconsistent in the first place?

Sevak: Let me give you an example from your own experience. You love good music?

Sanskriti: Quite a lot, you know.

Sevak: Suppose you are listening to what you regard as the greatest music you've ever heard. You become one with it. You are completely absorbed in it, being totally involved in it.

Sanskriti: That's my usual experience. I forget myself and am one with it. It is so uplifting and rewarding in itself.

Sevak: One moment you are self-conscious. Next moment you are not self-conscious any more, for you are one with music?

Sanskriti: Exactly.

Sevak: Your consciousness has then become one with what? Has it become the record that is playing? Or has it become the instrument that is sounding? Or is it now the sound vibrations, which are reaching your brain? What exactly has it become, other than itself? It cannot be itself, because then you would be just self-conscious.

Sanskriti: I cannot say. I know I do not become the sound of music. I am not self-conscious either. I am no longer the subject. In that experience I am not an object either. I am neither subjective nor objective. Maybe I am beyond both categories. Yet I am in deep rapport with my higher self. Or, I have penetrated some outward layers to dive into a dimension of reality within myself that I did not know before. Or, may be I knew it before, because I have had such experiences earlier.

Sevak: And this is what you experience?

Sanskriti: Most certainly.

Sevak: Now count the self-contradictions in that experience.

Sanskriti: You got me, Sevakji. If aesthetic experience can get me into so many self-contradictions, the experience of the ultimate would probably do so too. Thank you, this was a great learning experience.

Sevak: The point is that when it comes to spiritual experience we are knocking the limits of reason, thought, logic, language or, in other words, the whole world of dualities caught between the subject and object. Our normal world is dualistic, always with a subject that intends an object. At the spiritual level the duality between the subject and object breaks down. You cannot say that the two have become one, because the

subject has not become the object, nor the object has become the subject. Yet, they are not distinct any more. We are in an ineffable state of unison with the object, where the state itself is not just an object at that point while experiencing the ineffable, closing in toward the ultimate. The spiritual experience uplifts us and enriches our life, so we know that we are not half way toward schizophrenia. Reaching the ineffable ultimate makes one to stay in an ineffable state. Sanskriti, the aesthetic, as you noted, is a step in the direction of the spiritual. The aesthetic joy is called *Brahmananda-sahodara* or the sibling of the joy of reaching the ultimate.

Darshana: Congratulations, Sevakji, for finding your way out. Shows what a man can do for himself when left fending for himself.

Sevak: Now I appreciate the meaning of the Gita verse: *Uddhared atmanatmanam*. One should uplift oneself with oneself. Well said, Krishna.

Mahila: Where in the Gita does it occur? I want reference, because I often have to fend for myself and can use help like that.

Sanatan: Chapter 6, verse 5, Mahila.

Mahila: Thanks, Sanatan.

Sanatan: Sevakji, are the paradoxes typical only of Hinduism or of all spiritual experiences?

Sevak: They typically occur when one tries to describe the indescribable ultimate. A bird, however healthy, knows that it cannot reach the end of the sky flying. But it flies and tries any way. We finite creatures know that we cannot quite describe the infinite, but something in us makes us to try any way. We end up using language to communicate in good faith what we have experienced. But the matter goes beyond language. We end up in paradoxes.

Anish: What are some of the examples of paradoxes in other religions?

Sevak: Darshana can answer this better than myself. Logic is her field.

Darshana: First things first. So take Judaism first. Moses asks God for His name. God says, "I am that I am." He can't have a name, let alone

any other descriptions. Everything falls short of describing or even symbolizing Him. Yet, God has names, like Yahweh, for example, in Judaism. For, one has to speak to Him and about Him, after all.

Mahila: I sense a sort of grandeur about this.

Sanatan: I feel the same way. It shows how spiritual depth manages to find expression. Even paradox looks beautiful.

Darshana: Christianity has the holy Trinity where the three are one. Is it bad arithmetic? Maybe, but it is a great and uplifting mystery for a Christian seeker. Take Islam. Though this applies to other religions also, Islam feels its impact and comes out great. Allah is both infinitely kind and infinitely just. The two cannot go together, at least, not always. Yes, we cannot be both kind and just. But we are not Allah. He can do it or, rather, be both.

Just one example should suffice from an Eastern religion not known to the classical Hindu tradition. Daoism's most celebrated book *Dao Te Ching* opens with the famous paradox: The Dao that can be spoken of is not the real Dao. Lao Tzu, Daoism's legendary founder, also said that those who know do not speak and those who speak do not know. How could he say such a knowledgeable thing?!

But, last but not the least, the one I love the most among paradoxes is the classic Meister Eckhart: The eye with which I see him is the eye with which He sees me. Back to Sevakji.

Sevak: I was saying that the ultimate is truly ineffable, but we are left to speak about it anyhow. Moreover, psychological needs of expression and social needs of communication make us to say what we can to approximate the ultimate even as we cannot really describe it. Our background comes into play as we fumble to understand it and put it in words. It is bound to color our perception and description. But the *shruti* or primary revelation beautifully minimizes the coloring. See how it calls the ultimate as a unity-in-trinity of *sat, chit, ananda*. I like to take *sat* as pure, infinite and ultimate being, *chit* as pure, infinite and ultimate awareness and *ananda* as pure, infinite and ultimate joy. Widest concepts possible with minimal coloring, as good a way as there can be to describe the ultimate. Can you show me a better description of the ultimate? The criterion is that, to cover the infinite ultimate, one needs concepts that throw their net as wide as possible. Wider they are the more they will get of the ultimate. Of course, they will always fall short and that, precisely, is the point. In comparison, narrowly conceived

beliefs or personalities look so puny. "I am that I am" is so grand even as it captures just one out of the three widest concepts.

Anish: As you know, Sevakji, I have problems with a personal creator God. The theist idea just sounds like a myth. As Bertrand Russell said, statistically speaking, the scientific probability of a personal creator God existing is substantially the same as that of the tooth fairy existing. The ultimate you are describing is not quite like the theist idea. But it comes close to it. Is it just a philosopher's abstract version of the standard run-of-the-mill God?

Sevak: You people are bent upon giving me a hard time, eh? I guess I asked for it when I convened this seminar. My own *karma*? Seriously, I am enjoying this. It's a lovable challenge. Thanks, group.

Anish asks a question that is in the mind of many young Hindus. I will not go into its possible psychogenesis, though it is common among gurus to do just that. At best, psychologizing is merely speculative, even with the best intentions. Not being a good mind reader, my chances of messing it up are substantial. Besides, it is not my style to psychologize on the questioner. I respect all questions and, more importantly, the questioner. I assume that the questioner is asking in all earnestness. It is disrespectful to assume otherwise. Believing that the questioner intends the question, the respondent must meet the question head on without speculating on the motives of the questioner . . .

Anish: I appreciate your attitude, Sevakji. I have met many a people and some gurus, who habitually tend to psychologize, which turns me off. Those who evade widely prevalent questions in this way need to learn more before posing as gurus or spiritual teachers. I want my questions taken seriously.

Sevak: I support your outlook. Turning to myself, I need to say that I am not going to be able to answer all questions convincingly. All I do is respond as well as I can at the moment. I am unwilling to call myself a guru, as you know. I certainly like to respond to questions and I appreciate people who trust me with their questions. In any case, I do not wish my responses to be taken as truth. I will be happy if they provoke thought and induce consideration. The rest is up to the questioner. If I insist on reaching my own conclusion after enriching my mind with considering all strong choices available, I want to grant the same process to the questioner and, indeed, to all serious thinkers. If we end up disagreeing, we should do so amicably.

Anish: Every human has limits. It takes honesty to admit that. I see the honesty in you. It disturbs me that many gurus I have met feel as if they have nothing to learn any more.

Sevak: I don't know when I will stop learning. The Rigvedic saying *a no bhadrah kratavo yantu vishvatah* keeps inspiring me to seek learning in all corners of the world. To repeat, it means: let good thoughts come to us from everywhere. But let me turn to your question. It will take a mini-lecture, so please bear with me.

The ultimate is said to be ineffable but human proclivities make one to describe it in some way. Wider the description, better the coverage. Any way, the result is that there are many descriptions. Some descriptions are distinctly narrower than others. The *shruti*'s best description, because it is the widest possible description, is that the ultimate we experience at the bottom of our heart *is* or is of the nature of existence, awareness and joy. These three are among the concepts with widest coverage in terms of connotation. The idea is to cover as much as can be covered. Even then, the ultimate is not completely covered. It handily exceeds all possible concepts put together. The Rigvedic sage in the famous *Purusha-sukta* says: *sa bhumim vishvato vritva atyatishthad dashangulam*, meaning that the ultimate covered the whole ground from all sides and yet exceeded it by ten fingers. There is a deep symbolism in the concept of ten fingers. But the idea is that the ultimate goes beyond our most productive imaginations. In this sense, Hinduism is panentheistic, which means its concept of divinity is immanent, that is, all pervasive, as well as transcendent, that is, going beyond everything.

The *shruti* statements like *ekam eva advitiyam* or "one without a second," like *ekam sad vipra bahudha vadanti* or "the one being that sages speak of in many ways," and like *anid avatam svadhaya tad ekam* or "that one breathed by its own energy and without air" indicate that this ultimate is singular. Because it covers everything, there cannot be any other, rivals or competitors, for it would cover, include, embrace them. But its oneness cannot be in relation to a possible other, for there is no possibility of the other. So, oneness here is moot and pointless.

Basically being ineffable, it yet admits of many, albeit imperfect, ways of describing it. Ironically, paradoxicality may be one of the ways of describing it. The *Upanishads* use many paradoxes to talk about it. They are like, it is near, it is far, it is the smallest, it is the largest, it is inside, it is outside, it is heard, it cannot be heard, and so on. Lao Tzu's *Dao Te Ching*, which is a mystical poem, is also packed full of paradoxes about the ultimate that it calls *Dao* or the Way. The main idea here is that there is no end to its descriptions. Hindu religious literature

contains several works that list in a metrical form the attributes of the divine. They most commonly list a thousand names each. For example, we have the thousand names of Vishnu, of Shiva, of Devi, and so on. The *Purusha-sukta* speaks of the ultimate as having thousand heads, thousand eyes and thousand feet. The number thousand here stands for infinity. So, unlike in the case of the paths, of which the major ones are four, the possible descriptions of the ultimate run into infinity, with no one description being a knockout one. Still, the triple description with the comprehensive coverage of existence, awareness and joy seems like a winner over others.

Anish: Just one moment, Sevakji. You have referred to the three dimensions of the ultimate as widest in scope. Can you elaborate on that?

Sevak: The three are existence, awareness and joy. Existence, reality and being are almost synonymous. Existence is that which is behind anything that exists, making it to exist. The whole world of everything that exists includes an incredibly vast domain of everything that exists, ranging from a quark, electron or quantum to the largest galaxy clusters known to science. What it does not include is by definition part of nonexistence, illusion or mere appearance, so it does not count. The second dimension is awareness, which includes consciousness, knowledge, theory, communication, intuition, imagination and reason. The latter are not possible without awareness. What is not part of awareness is, *ipso facto*, part of ignorance and falsehood. As such, it does not count. The last dimension is joy, which is my favored translation of *ananda*. It includes happiness, bliss, pleasure, satisfaction, contentment, well-being and fulfillment. My alternative translation would be "fulfillment." It is what all living beings strive for throughout their life. If you and I cannot but strive for fulfillment, somewhere deep down in us we are intimately connected with fulfillment. A given object may fulfill someone and yet may not fulfill another. So, it is said that . . .

Sanskriti: beauty lies in the eyes of the beholder.

Sevak: You have an aesthete's authoritative statement right here.

Sanatan: But then the only beautiful thing in the world would be the eye of the beholder!

Darshana: I am happy to see you guys entering into a philosophical dilemma. You can't blame it on me this time. You are doing it to yourselves!

Sevak: Darshana, this time I am going to find a way out.

Darshana: Let us see what you have up your sleeve.

Sevak: Ineffabilism, in one word. In aesthetics or in spirituality, that is going to be my chant to ward off philosophical dilemmas. It may not work all the time. But I feel it does a reasonably good job here. Darshana will correct me and straighten it out.

Darshana: Go on, Sevakji, let us hear the full story.

Sevak: The object of both aesthetic and spiritual experience should be regarded as the ineffable dimension of the ultimate. The experience itself is also an ineffable state of consciousness. Sanskriti showed this to us through her great example of music listening. I am offering ineffability not as an entity in itself but as a symbol of what is exactly happening in an aesthetic or spiritual experience or, for that matter, whenever anyone experiences total involvement in anything that brings in the sense of beauty, truth or grandeur. This would include moments of important scientific discoveries and moments when mathematicians reach penetrating insight in their subject, for example. Ineffable ultimate spreads its wings everywhere. Again, what I want to say is not so much to substitute or pinpoint reality as to symbolize it.

In this light the subjectivism, which says that beauty lies in the eyes of the beholder and objectivism which says that lotus remains beautiful regardless of whether someone sees it as beautiful are both made possible by the symbolism of ineffable. Both are just two different languages to express, understand and interpret the actual experience. Both are valid in comparison to each other and in their own ways but are ultimately incomplete, being unable to capture the unique and salient nature of the experience involved. Yes, to say that the experience or its object is ineffable is not to describe it to give information. But if you already have the information in the form of acquaitance by the actual experience it is a way to symbolize it. At least the symbolism of ineffable has the facility to show how the two rival languages arise and quarrel with each other without any capacity in themselves to resolve the issue. Symbolism of ineffable does not quite resolve the issue but shows

how the issue arises and cannot be resolved logically. It also shows that we are in the territory beyond logical categories.

Madhyama: Sevakji, let me try to put it in less technical way so that everybody is together on this. If I didn't get it right, please say so.

Sevak: Go ahead, Madhyama.

Madhyama: In our moments of creative intuition or penetrating insights we experience a state and an object, which cannot be clearly identified as subjective or objective in the familiar sense. They exist in a way that is beyond these categories but they do bring to us a deeper dimension of ourselves or of reality. "Ineffable ultimate" is your chosen expression to symbolize this unique feature exactly as it is experienced. It is not amenable to familiar categories but, if we want to put it in terms of these categories, we will use one or the other category. That is, one may use the category of subjectivism and another may use that of objectivism. The quarrel then issuing between the two camps cannot be logically resolved but one can see how it arises through the symbolism of ineffable.

Anish: If x is not clearly a, or clearly b and it cannot be conceived to be anything else, then let p stand for x to enable us to see why some will call it a, some will call it b and why their quarrel will never be resolved.

Darshana: Well put, Anish!

Sanskriti: Music I like is certainly beautiful to me but may not be so to somebody else. I have no words to describe that someone else! Aurangzeb? Any way, then I cannot resolve the issue whether the beauty in question belongs to my mind or the music. This quarrel between subjectivism and objectivism cannot be logically resolved because the experience that embeds both uniquely transcends both. So, I just call that experience by the phrase "symbolism of ineffable ultimate." I insist that the latter be seen only as a symbol of the actual experience. This way it will remind me of its indeterminate character in relation to the two categories. At the same time, it will also show me why both subjectivist and objectivist languages arise.

Darshana: This is yet another clever stratagem of Sevakji. Logic has, after unending debates spanning centuries, not been able to resolve this issue. The problem may be that its faith in clear consistency may be

overstated at least as far as these experiences are concerned. And this is exactly what it does not want to believe. To believe it is to admit that reality has a dimension that transcends logic. Which hurts the logician's ego unbearably. Sevakji has diagnosed it and says that there is no cure. I already told the group that I am not convinced by the strategy of wishing the problem away or calling it names, even though it is quite fashionable among philosophical elite lately.

Two thoughts excite me at this point. First, Sevakji's symbolism of ineffable can be extended to many other problems of philosophy, amazingly to the problem of perception, for example. Secondly, Sevakji's theory has important repercussions on philosophy of logic, where it can shed possible light on what is within and what is beyond the purview of logic. But these are technical issues. On the matter at hand, the theory of the symbolism of ineffable gives us a way out of the philosophical dilemma. It may not be the only one. Anyhow, it is a clever stratagem. Sevakji, you did it again.

Sevak: Thank you, Darshana. Your approval, guarded and qualified as it is, gives me confidence.

Anish: I am eager to get back to my question. Why isn't the ultimate with its three dimensions of existence, awareness and joy just a philosopher's abstract version of the standard God who is a super-person that created the world?

Sevak: Let us go there. In Sanskriti's music example, we have music, which we know to be not identical with our personal consciousness. But take the sage's deepest intuition of the ultimate reality as it is seen at the bottom of one's heart and mind. It is clearly felt to reveal the nature of the ultimate reality at a spiritual level. In the aesthetic experience there is a medium, such as music, through which a glimpse of the ineffable ultimate is obtained. The sage's intuition, or *arsha-pratyaksha* as we have called it, is without any medium or intermediary. It is direct, or *pratyaksha*.

But is the experience subjective or objective? The sage is clearly not making up anything, except for possibly bringing one's own deepest nature along with the experience of the ultimate spiritual. In any case, the sage's own deepest spiritual reality is essentially the same as or, in deep accord with, that of the ultimate spiritual reality behind the universe.

There are two possibilities here. At the deepest level, the sage regards oneself either as a person or as consciousness. Notice the

difference carefully. Ask yourself if your deepest self is a person with a distinct will, experiencing the world around and within yourself. Or, is it the consciousness that supports all these personal experiences and without which the experiences will not be, well, experiences? If you go for consciousness, you renounce or marginalize personhood. Outwardly, it will look as if you are going for an abstract version of personhood. Inwardly, you are not a person at all but pure consciousness, which is just consciousness rather than *your* consciousness. If you go for personhood, you are discounting or marginalizing consciousness, which is the very ground on which you are standing as a person.

Personhood is subjective; consciousness is objective. Hence, the sage's experience is subjective, if viewed through personhood. It is objective, if viewed through consciousness. Now, the object of the experience is ultimate reality itself, which is at the rock bottom of everything, the whole universe of existence. So, if the sage sees the ultimate reality through personhood, the result will be a super-person. If the experience is viewed through consciousness, the result will be unity with cosmic consciousness. If a wave can see the ocean of which it is a part, it will feel an overpowering presence that is going to sweep it away. If a drop of water can see the ocean of which it is a part, it will feel a self-securing unity, which can never be taken away. My question for you, Anish, is whether the drop's point of view is just a philosopher's abstract version of the wave's point of view?

Anish: Of course, I will have to say that neither the drop's viewpoint can be reduced to the wave's, nor can wave's be reduced to drop's. They are distinct yet valid from their own perspectives. So, Sevakji, you are saying that if I reach the same level as the sage at the moment of final spiritual experience, my experience will have to collapse into either the drop view or the wave view. In other words, the experience is ineffable but I will understand or interpret it either like a drop or a wave. If I experience the ultimate existence behind the universe as a person, it will appear as an overpowering source, a creator, and cosmic person. If I experience it as consciousness, however, it will appear as the same as my own essence, putting me at total ease and peace with myself and with the world. I can choose to be a subjectivist and put the beauty of a lotus in my own head. Or, I can choose to be an objectivist and keep it in the lotus. In other words, I can choose not to be a philosopher!

Darshana: And you can choose to be a philosopher as well!

Anish: True. Any way, the reality is that the actual experience uniquely transcends but underpins both categories and shows how the two irreconcilable views arise. This way speaking, both views will be valid in comparison to each other.

Darshana: How does this affect your atheism, Anish?

Anish: An atheist too has to allow for reality. One can call it matter, energy, force or whatever. Why not ineffable existence? The way Sevakji has put it, I do not have to go for the wave viewpoint, which is my bone of contention. I can live with it as one perspective, although, I cannot accord it full validity in my heart of hearts. I can go for the drop's perspective and bypass the standard God. I think I can live with Sevakji's view as a whole. It does not force me into a questionable divine creator.

Sevak: Darshana, how are we doing in terms of the main issue of this session? Are we ready to summarize the matter in a succinct but lucid articulation?

Darshana: I think we are there. Let me attempt an articulation. We sought the metaphysical core of Hindu experience, with the backdrop of its global cognates. For an answer we went to the sage's experience. The latter revealed that the ultimate reality of the final spiritual experience such as that of a sage is spiritual and one without a second. This being underlies our multifarious universe and supports its existence. Most importantly, however, it is ineffable in the final analysis. Yet, if we have to speak about it, the best way is to regard it as unity of three dimensions: existence, awareness and joy. Each of these three is to be taken in its pure, infinite and ultimate form. So, this ineffable of sage's experience is pure, infinite and ultimate existence, pure, infinite and ultimate awareness and pure, infinite and ultimate joy. If it is like an ocean, we are like drops or waves in that ocean. As a drop one experiences it as essentially the same as oneself, thus revealing existence, awareness and joy as its own nature. As a wave one experiences it as a cosmic person distinct from oneself but being the source of all existence, awareness and joy that there can be. The drop speaks the monistic language of unity. The wave speaks the theistic language of duality. Both languages, although mutually irreconcilable, are equally valid approaches to the ineffable ultimate. Depending upon the aspirants' orientations, the two languages generate a large number of partial descriptions, all of which are permissible too. The ineffable ultimate is

in everything one can see or think of. It is also much beyond everything that we can see or think of.

Madhyama: Very inclusive and distinctive. It is friendly to the central features of personal God in the Western religions. It is friendly to main aspects of impersonal highest reality in the Eastern religions. Symbolism of ineffable works as an instrument of inclusiveness and makes it distinct from exclusively personal or impersonal viewpoints of divinity. Seems like this is going to do double duty too, serving to be both internal and distinctive feature of Hinduism.

Sanskriti: We now have covered methodological, ethical and metaphysical aspects of Hinduism that are both internal defining features and distinctive features that stand out from other religions. They hardly exclude anything of importance in other religions and yet together stand out, giving Hinduism a clear and distinct identity.

Mahila: We seem to have fulfilled the requirements of both, internal definition or *sva-rupa lakshana* and external definition or *tata-stha lakshana*. We do not have either *avyapti*, that is, insufficient extension or *ativyapti*, that is, excessive inclusion.

Navin: What about the stipulative-descriptive issue?

Darshana: Sevakji's symbolism of ineffable has gone to the core of the subjective-objective issue. Stipulative-descriptive is a form of subjective-objective issue itself. If you have dealt with the tree, you have dealt with the trunk. But if this way of looking at it is not sufficient, we should make a final list of what we've got and check if we have achieved a good balance between stipulation and description.

Sevak: Darshana, can you make us that final list?

Darshana: We have to represent and compress our proceedings in a small set of core statements. According to our definition, Hinduism endorses the following statements.

1. The ultimate reality is ineffable.
2. If one *has* to speak about it, it can be spoken of in many ways.
3. The more inclusive the description, the more representative it is.

4. One of the most inclusive internal descriptions is this: It is or has pure, infinite and ultimate existence, it is or has pure, infinite and ultimate awareness and it is or has pure, infinite and ultimate joy.
5. The monistic language of unity and the theistic language of duality arise from the desire to speak about the ineffable ultimate. They are mutually irreconcilable and yet equally valid in comparison to each other.
6. According to the monistic language the ultimate *is* existence, awareness and joy, while according to the theistic language the ultimate *has* existence, awareness and joy.
7. A good external description of the ultimate reality is that it is one spiritual being that underlies our multifarious universe whose existence is borrowed from that being.
8. Belief in the ultimate is supported by a united application of direct experience, inferential reason and reliable testimony. Many sages of ancient times experienced the ultimate directly as a result of intense spiritual search. Their testimony is recorded and elaborated in *shruti* or primary scripture, *smriti* or secondary scripture, *itihasa* or the history tradition and *purana* or the cosmology tradition.
9. Belief in the ultimate is only the first step in a long spiritual journey. The end of journey is the concrete experience and realization of the ultimate.
10. There are four major spiritual paths to realize the ultimate: the path of knowledge, the path of selfless action, the path of devotion and the path of meditation.
11. Reciprocal fairness characterizes serious transactions in all cultures and as such is the foundational postulate of ethical life and its meaning. It ensures fairness, marries freedom with responsibility and provides incentive to be moral and disincentive against being unethical. It gives hope and support in adversity and helps us from getting prosperity to our head. It helps us make our own destiny by our own efforts. Rightly used, it does not box one in an absolute morality or fatalistic inaction or indifference. In relation to ethical life, it has greater explanatory power than its rivals. Reincarnation is one of its important corollaries.

Madhyama: Excellent detailed summary. Can I distill it down to just four simple principles? One spiritual being, many ways of speaking about it, many ways to reach it and reciprocal fairness. They define

Hinduism internally and, together, make it to stand out as distinct from all other religions.

Sevak: Great summary of an excellent detailed summary. Madhyama's four can be an opening when one is asked what Hinduism is. Darshana's detailed summary can be the source if more details are expected.

Sanskriti: I was taken by Darshana's stipulative-descriptive dilemma. I would like to see where we stand on that issue.

Darshana: Most actual definitions would involve elements of both stipulation and description. That is because one cannot totally avoid subjective stipulative element except perhaps in mathematics and symbolic logic. In order to assess the worth of a definition it is necessary to examine what one is trying to accomplish through the definition. Our group is not engaged in achieving exact descriptive objectivity, which is the feigned intent of, for example, a social scientist. Our effort, rather, is to capture Hinduism as it is experienced and understood by its followers and practitioners. We are also not out to either denigrate or valorize Hinduism through a stipulation made to that order. We want to achieve reasonable objectivity with a view to adjust Hinduism for application to and enhancement of our life today. Given all this, I would say that we have achieved our objective through the definition we have determined.

There is also the question of doing justice to the subject. Definitions in different areas of inquiry need different approaches in order to receive justice to their individual nature. Besides, the areas of religion and philosophy are notorious for being resistant to precise and clear definitions. Furthermore, Hinduism is a very complex affair in its own right. In view of this difficulty, we have, again, succeeded in doing justice to the built-in complexity of Hinduism by offering a definition that is not an exercise in reductive simplification. Many people prefer simple definitions that they can just feel comfortable with. Such definitions usually end up in a lot of trouble when subjected to close scrutiny.

If we look at our definition of Hinduism as a whole, whether we are looking at my detailed one or Madhyama's distilled one, we find that we have drawn heavily on the *Vedanta* philosophy as far as the metaphysical aspect is concerned. The metaphysical views of the ultimate in other five systems are not exactly the same as in the *Vedanta* system. There are attempts at showing that each of the five is a partial view or an aspect of the Vedantic view which is the whole view of the ultimate in the Hindu philosophy. I am not sure that these attempts are logically successful.

But they have wide currency, of course at the expense of the other systems. The popularity shows how powerful Vedantic system is. It absolutely dominates the Hindu philosophy. In this situation, it is not a grave fault that we lean heavily on *Vedanta* as we do. Any way, the metaphysical core accepted in our definition is friendly to all schools of Vedantic philosophy and yet has a coherence of its own. Coherence is a significant element in a definition, so that is a positive. In any case, our definition is not quite hostile to other systems of philosophy and, in saying that the ultimate can be spoken of in many ways beyond the monistic and theistic languages of *Vedanta*, permits a sufficient measure of their expression by way of clear implication. Overall, therefore, it is fair to say that the metaphysical aspect in our definition involves a degree of stipulation in favor of Vedantic philosophy but, given the prominence of the Vedantic view, it is not particularly vulnerable.

The ethical aspect of *karma* is common to all systems and, hence, is quite objective and descriptive as a part of our definition. Hinduism, however, shares it with Buddhism and Jainism. We interpreted *karma* as reciprocal fairness and gave it a particular tilt that probably represents the widely and actually prevalent understanding of it among Hindus. On the other hand, it should be noted that *karma* is spoken about in the Hindu texts in ways that are not quite identical with our view. But we are less vulnerable in this stipulation because we are possibly closer to the way it is actually understood by the Hindus. In this sense we stay descriptive and objective.

As far as the methodological aspect is concerned, we seem to have done quite a good job. We incorporated the three *pramana*s or means of knowledge and the four *yoga*s or spiritual paths in a very coherent way. This was quite objective because the Hindu philosophy certainly uses the three means of knowledge. The four paths are widely understood to be announced and celebrated in the *Bhagavad-gita*, a central text of Hinduism, and are, as such, part and parcel of the Hindu spirituality as it is understood and practiced.

We took a very inclusive view of the major sources of Hinduism and refrained from excluding any of them or their parts arbitrarily. Our delineation of other criteria gave us an orientation that would serve to narrow our focus on those aspects of the source texts that are representative of the way Hindus understand their spirituality and philosophy. Hinduism is more a religion of the people or even humanity than a religion of a simple book.

My overall judgment is that our definition is a distinct contribution toward giving Hinduism a clear articulation as well as a distinction among other religions. It is closer to how Hindus actually understand

themselves than what I have found elsewhere. It has an unusual degree of internal coherence and it seems to represent the major internal features of Hindu theory and practice. Given the extreme difficulty of the enterprise where so many intellectuals have thrown in the towel or have come up with definitions that are patently vulnerable, we have done a commendable job. Our definition, in either of the two versions, succeeds in identifying major central features of Hinduism and is thus bound to have a very wide application, leaving very little of Hinduism that it does not cover. At the same time it very clearly succeeds in distinguishing Hinduism from all other religions. We have accomplished something of real value here.

Madhyama: Darshana, the group thanks you for a detailed and thoughtful evaluation of our effort. We are encouraged by your positive assessment.

Darshana: It is time to end this session, Sevakji.

Madhyama: Sevakji, what should we think about for the next session?

Sevak: After considering any questions that may have arisen on what we have done so far, the fourth session should devote itself to looking at different definitions and characterizations offered in some representative writings of non-Hindu authors. We need to know about other peoples' perception of what we are about. Please look into some of these and present them at the next session for the group's consideration, reflection and comments.

Let us take a snapshot preview of the matters ahead of us. Looking ahead, we will do some field-testing of our definition of Hinduism. All in the group will go into their fields of contact to test out the definition for possible changes or adjustments. Each of us will report back to the group and offer their own comments on the definition. We will modify the definition, as we deem fit. After that we will begin to explore the depth and details of Hinduism. We will look to our conservative and reform Hindus to present us with their detailed versions and in-depth visions of Hinduism. These will receive comments from our moderate and philosophical Hindus. We will consider the versions and visions along with the comments and try to put them together in an integrated form, which may be called "moderate Hinduism". The latter may serve as a basis for our Hinduism for Today.

The next step will be to explore social, cultural and scientific aspects of Hinduism, involving our feminist, cultural and atheistic

Hindus. These participants will make presentations on the way they see problems and promises in Hinduism from their perspectives. The group will map them, reflect on them and develop them to cohere with Hinduism for Today as articulated thus far. At this point we will take stock and present what looks to us like the most promising form that Hinduism should take for our day and age.

To put the matter alternatively, we will expand our definition of Hinduism into a foundation of Hinduism on which different creative structures can be raised. The foundation will have the imprint of our conservative, reform and moderate Hindu participants. The building on the foundation will be illustrated by our cultural, feminist and atheistic participants. This way, we will ensure and utilize input from everybody here.

This, roughly speaking, is the general total agenda. However, we will proceed at our own pace and will change whatever needs to be changed as we surmise through our journey together. Just call it a caricature of the prospect ahead.

Madhyama: The prospect ahead looks promising and exciting. We are embarked on a constructive task of great importance to us and, hopefully, to other Hindus as well and beyond to the humanity in general.

Sevak: Thanks, Madhyama. You put it well. We are not going to make any tall claims. We will do what we can with the lights we have. We will remain open to comments and criticisms, which we will consider earnestly. But, we will then make our own judgments, again, according to our best lights.

I want to thank all of you deeply. It was a great session. In seeking a definition of Hinduism, we undertook a daunting and what many intellectuals would consider to be a nearly impossible task. More importantly, we came out with a highly promising outcome. What was gratifying to me was the way the group stood up to the challenging logical demands involved. Keep up that spirit. Please come back for the next session.

Namas-te, everyone.

All: *Namas-te*, Sevakji.

SESSION 4:

WHAT HINDUISM IS NOT

Sevak: *Om Tat Sat*, everyone. Welcome to the fourth session of our seminar on Hinduism for Today.

All: *Om Tat Sat*, Sevakji.

Sevak: I do not have a great sense of direction. I have a rough map of the terrain I would like us to tread during a session. But as it is wont with most philosophical discussions that are not pre-structured, at times we get off the subject and move on some tangents. I prefer to let the group follow its own lights and flow with its own spontaneity. However, if you are uncomfortable with this and would rather like a rigid structure, please let me know.

Madhyama: No, Sevakji. We are doing fine the way matters are going with you as the facilitator. We like the spontaneous format. We do not mind reaching our destination a little late. We are happy to pick up a few valuable things on the roadside that interest us. I know, because I have been talking to the group about this and I've found that this is how we want to proceed. A rigid preconceived structure is not our cup of tea, at least not as far as the kind of discussion we are engaged in is concerned. With the spontaneous flow format we also get to ask questions as they arise in our mind. Yes, we would be concerned if we were so distracted as to not accomplish our goals. We are not in that danger. So, thanks, but no thanks, for generously proposing to change the format.

Sevak: That makes me feel good. Of course there are a few advantages to the conventional format of pre-planned and highly structured form. I am personally more comfortable with a free-flowing format with just the barebones outline in front.

Thanks, Madhyama, for talking to the group on the subject. This time let us start with questions you might have on the definition of Hinduism we developed at the last session. You must have pondered it and now may have some notions of its strengths as well as weaknesses. Defining Hinduism, of all the things in the world, cannot be without controversy. Our topic for today's discussion is perceptions and characterizations of Hinduism in the world outside Hinduism. It should give us a view on the image of Hinduism in the outside world. We may even learn a few things from such a view . . .

Sanatan: Sevakji, I am afraid it will rather reveal what Hinduism is not. Or, maybe we'll get some misleading and superficial snapshots of Hinduism. Typically, non-Hindu perceptions of Hinduism are unsympathetic and, consequently, inaccurate. Generally, Hinduism itself has been very generous in its views of other religions of the world. One would, therefore, expect a tendency to reciprocate and understand the Hindu mind. But the case is the opposite. There might be problems with the way Hindus communicate and project Hinduism. But many of my Hindu friends have lost patience over the situation. Sadly, misperceptions, misconceptions and even distortions abound about this underdog religion called Hinduism.

Sanskriti: Hindus could communicate better about who they are and what they stand for . . .

Navin: True, but it has not been easy to find receptive ears.

Mahila: I believe Hindus need to take a more activist role on letting the outside world know about the Hindu perspective in order to make the image of Hinduism what it should be rather than the current misinformed one that has developed around the planet.

Darshana: At this point, let us focus on questions we might have on our own definition. We will then move on to the descriptions of Hinduism prevalent outside and comment specifically on some typical outlooks that do not seem accurate or sympathetic even as they claim to be objective or neutral. Concepts of objectivity and neutrality themselves may need a good review.

Sevak: I support Darshana. We must question ourselves and make ourselves stronger by self-criticism. We can then turn to external perceptions of Hinduism.

Anish: You all know I believe in questioning, especially questioning ourselves. Let us look at our definition and then move to external views of Hinduism.

Madhyama: Let me reflect a bit first on the characteristics and advantages of the definition of Hinduism we have construed. I will refer to both our definitions, the long and short ones, together as one unit. As such, it does bring out what is common to most Hindus, what is important to Hinduism as a whole and, considering all its elements

together, distinguishes Hinduism from other religions and philosophies. It should be pointed out that there is much more to Hinduism than what the definition contains or even implies. Yet, the definition does sort out confusion and seeming inconsistencies created by misperceiving Hinduism as a form of misfitting alien categories like polytheism, henotheism or pantheism or even as a congeries of chaotic beliefs and practices. It permits a measure of change and development without destroying the core. It also has an organic unity that holds its elements in a coherent form. In sum, it clearly represents a significant core of Hinduism.

On the other side, our definition won't permit some forms of exclusivist practices or beliefs to be included in its fold. One is tempted to say that these are not characteristic of Hinduism and hence are best left to fend for themselves. However, wouldn't it be like a stipulation to achieve an intended result?

What can be said, nevertheless, is that it is nearly impossible to be so exact as to include everything within the conceptual framework of a definition. On that ground, I doubt that this potential exclusion is a serious blemish. It is specifically so, in view of Hinduism as a whole and the complexity typical of Hinduism. To accommodate everything could involve diluting and affecting the core negatively, which is too much of a price to pay for such a largely political gesture. To give an example, it is not necessary to include every hair style or even entire cultures in the definition of a human being. There are always marginal and borderline cases in all living definitions. They do not dictate what is to be included in a definition. One can't please all and does not have to.

Mahila: Madhyama, that is a very fair statement. We may be risking some internal dissension within Hindu folks issuing from our definition. But those dissenting are likely to be sectarian interests.

Anish: We do not have to have the tail wag the dog.

Mahila: Let me add this. One can say with reasonable confidence that a Hindu is one who does not have serious problems with our definition. And, one who does not have serious problems with the definition may legitimately call oneself a Hindu, no matter what the world calls her or him. The definition is not an either-or or black-and-white proposition.

Navin: I will put this forward as my reflection. There are self-professed Hindus who do not regard Mahatma Gandhi as a Hindu and there are Hindus who regard him as one of the greatest Hindus. Our definition can

accommodate the occurrence of both these views. It is not a mean accomplishment to account for drastically different internal perceptions.

Anish: A Hindu does not have to endorse every aspect of the definition. Anyone who has problems with a few aspects is not excluded if he or she is comfortable with the main thrust of the definition. I feel comfortable with the definition although I have a few reservations about some aspects. It's as fair a definition as can be achieved. For anyone to really challenge it, one will need to come up with something better, which is a tall order. What I find attractive about our definition is it does not bind me to the capricious commandments of a unilaterally acting personal God. It gives me freedom of choice. I am uncomfortable with dogmas that come from nowhere. Our definition describes a balanced form of non-dogmatic spirituality, which is also humanistic and upright.

Sanskriti: I support the general tenor I see emerging here. We are not out to simply accommodate every faction for political purposes. Some factions may feel marginalized or even excluded. But we have a secure core of Hinduism. Our definition is a solid achievement, especially in view of the fact that many scholars in the field have thrown in the towel on achieving one. Any way, it challenges everyone inside and outside Hinduism to bring forth a more suitable definition with better coverage. We stay open to reconsider in light of stronger alternatives.

Darshana: I agree that our definition is a fair construct. It should mean something that eight Hindus from widely different perspectives in a few hours of discussion could articulate and propose what Hinduism means to them and what it should mean to their fellow Hindus and even non-Hindus for that matter. What it means to Hindus or what is important to Hindus has greater defining value than what others can make it out to be. A Hindu of our definition would be unwilling to propose, for example, a definition of Christianity that Christians would not identify with,

Sanatan: In fact Hindus have been showing such good will to others in face of others not reciprocating the good will.

Darshana: An objection can be conceived that we did not consult simple folks roaming the streets or drawing water on a village well. Although these folks and their views are not to be neglected, they can hardly be expected to have the language or concepts to go into an articulate definition of a complex subject like Hinduism. At least not any more than an average plumber can be expected to define solid state physics.

Mahila: But let us not underestimate the latent wisdom of the simple folks, for they are often smart enough to understand what is involved. If we explain what we are doing in terms simple enough for them, I am sure many of them will agree wholeheartedly.

Darshana: I think you are right. Thank you, Mahila, for gently reminding me of my elite professorial mindset! Seriously, the manner in which the questions are framed can be very important. If an average Hindu is asked what kind of God he or she believes in, the answer is not likely to articulate a universal spiritual being envisaged in our definition. If you ask if Krishna can save the souls like Christ does, you will only draw a garbled response. This does not mean that the definition is deficient. Mahila is right that the average Hindu evinces religious behavior in the background of our definition. The definition may be too sophisticated for him or her to be in the forefront. But, if you ask the folks whether worship of different gods or goddesses leads to the same spiritual end, the answer will be an overwhelming yes. If you ask if different looking pictures of gods and goddesses seen in Hindu shrines represent the same ultimate divinity, the answer will be an emphatic yes. If you ask if good deeds will bring good results and evil deeds evil results, the answer will be a resounding yes. This is the strength of our definition.

Mahila: As a social worker, I want to say that Darshana is right on this. You need to ask properly framed questions in order to do the right field testing. If you ask questions framed with the background assumptions of Western religions, for example, you will confuse not just average Hindus but even intellectually sophisticated Hindus. And the results will be misleading at best and grave distortions in all likelihood. Social workers are also known to manipulate their results to agree with their preconceived notions. However, properly conducted interviews and questioning remain an important tool in the arsenal of a truth-seeking social scientist.

My point is that Hindus should be asked questions from within Hinduism to get answers that truly reflect their beliefs, feelings and experience. The questions should not be framed in the background of religions that are foreign language to them. I agree with Darshana. One should ask, for example, if the four defining principles of Madhyama make sense to them rather than whether questions like "What is your belief?" or "What god do you believe in?" This is because belief is not as large a part of their religion as it is for Christianity.

Sanskriti: I have been thinking on my brief reflection. I want to change it some. I agree with Darshana and Mahila. From my experience, however, I do not want to underestimate the weight of exclusivist Hindus that may feel excluded. A plethora of new sects and cults led by a number of questionable gurus and swamis has recently developed worldwide. Each believes that it is special and specifically blessed. Of course, typical of being Hindu factions, they do not disparage others and heap eternal damnation on them. They just revel in themselves and worship their gurus rather slavishly, marginalizing even God. Their leaders also encourage this in a tacit manner. At times they do this even explicitly and shamelessly. These factions are likely to feel that our definition excludes them. Not that they are important. They are like wild offshoots of the mainstream Hindu religion. They give bad name to Hinduism. In their blind pursuit of their gurus' blessings, they have gathered considerable riches and consolidated remarkable power. Our definition is not made to offend them. While the definition is not meant to exclude them, they would feel excluded just because they do not get a special mention or recognition. I will refrain from calling out names because we do not want to enter politics in this seminar.

Anish: Too bad they feel excluded from our definition. They should blame themselves, because their lopsided valorization of small alleys ignores or downplays the highway of Hinduism. It makes me even more comfortable with our definition. Most of them are ignorant folks without much knowledge, or even the desire for knowledge, of the central principles of Hinduism. I know a few of them. Some of them are professionals, although most are middle class laborers, clerks, technicians or small business people. They are part of mushrooming cults piggybacking on general Hindu sentiment that tolerates wild variations. If narrow-minded cults start defining a mainstream religion, that would be the end of the religion. Their lopsided emphasis on their own small-minded personality cults is indicative of a high level of security they need in their life. They need to grow up. They miss their daddy. Some of them even call their guru by the name daddy. They are not a big loss for our definition. Who needs their money, power or false prestige?

Sanskriti: Anish, I do not want to develop a definition to legitimize them. Their proliferating number is worrisome and threatening. They certainly get something spiritually enhancing from their slave-like surrender to their pseudo-gurus who would abuse them any way. A large part of the blame should go to the pseudo-gurus, however. They are the ones who

encourage their victim-like clients to worship them. One also needs to be mindful of a good deal of social service work they do in the form of supporting hospitals, clinics, schools, colleges and sundry relief funds. This good work, which must be appreciated, works to legitimize these personality cults in the eyes of the public.

Anish: Christianity and Buddhism started around the personalities of Jesus and Gautama but were spread out to become world religions. Buddhism is less vulnerable on this count because it only reveres the Buddha for the most part. But wouldn't institutionalized Christianity, except for its mammoth size, be akin to this type of cult-like super-guru worship?

Madhyama: Professor Ninian Smart, a prominent Christian scholar, in one of his books I read some years ago, talks about this as Christianity's scandal of particularity.

Anish: Knowing this history it is not surprising that these little personality cults are happening in Hinduism. To some extent, they have always happened in the history of Hinduism. What I want to say is that these fringe entities should not make us to review our definition. Hinduism with its large heart will always let them happen within its bosom, but they won't be able to reach and affect the defining core of Hinduism.

Madhyama: We should always be on ours guard on fake gurus. There are few genuine gurus and they suffer because of the many fake gurus. I met a swami some years ago and told him that I worked in the field of education administration. But instead of inquiring about education in any form he went on and on talking about this rich guy who was his devotee and that powerful professional who was also his devotee.

Sanskriti: That reminds me of a music guru, a classical vocalist, I met some time ago. He told me that he stopped singing on radio when he was told by some of his old fans that his own students sang better than him. Being jealous of one's own students is not my idea of an authentic guru.

Sanatan: I have feelings similar to those of the group here. As an educator, however, I also feel that we need to educate these adult folks more widely in the deeper aspects of Hinduism. They mostly combine *bhakti-yoga* or the path of devotion with a measure of *karma-yoga* or the

path of selfless action in a very simple way. Given the pressures of everyday life, they need a relief valve, which their cult worship forms for them. Also, they congregate in the presence of their guru or guru's pictures. This, particularly, substitutes for caste gatherings, which are increasingly fading out, and allows them a sense of belonging to a community. Not very unlike a newly formed church or denomination of Christianity. They do find some spiritual nurture through their form of religious practice.

Navin: We should observe that cultish uprisings happen to all major religions through their history. Because of instant communication we now become aware of them all together and that creates an impact on us. Not that this is a positive development, even as Sanatan well points out the psychological need for security and stress relief they satisfy. Under the influence of Sevakji and Darshana, I am learning not to support psychologizing about serious opposing positions, but this points to situations that seem vulnerable to psychologizing criticisms.

Our definition does not exclude them deliberately. It just invites them to come out in the broad sunshine of the universal aspect of Hinduism. They need not keep hiding in the comfortable shelter of their pseudo-guru and imbibe just what the pseudo-guru wishes them to. But even their pseudo-gurus draw frequently from Hindu texts and pay a lot of lip service to mainline Hinduism, even feigning worship and recognition of the Hindu gods. I have seen pictures of Hindu gods side by side the pseudo-gurus' pictures at their functions. So, if they are not genuine Hindus, they are good mimics. When pressed hard, I have gotten their community leaders to admit that theirs is only one of the many ways of Hinduism and, just like Hinduism, they do allow and recognize worship of traditional divine forms. Probably, a problem is how to help them to think a little beyond the sectarian alley on which they find themselves. Culturally they are not easily distinguishable from their native Hindu soil, so to say. Their festivals and celebrations follow Hindu ritual traditions topped by their individual pseudo-guru dressing.

Darshana: One gathers the notion from all this that the newly mushrooming pseudo-guru cults are not totally deprived of spirituality but can stand reform to make them more attractive to universal Hinduism as it was envisaged and developed by the sages. One can hope that they will come home as errant adolescents eventually do. Or, alternatively, one can take a more activist stance and develop ways of spiritual education that provide the information necessary to help them make thoughtful and truly free choices and decisions for themselves. There is

no need to be overly paternalistic here, for they already have their father figures in their gurus. It is the pseudo-gurus that can and probably should make themselves more knowledgeable. But who will bell the cat?

Sevak: We need to continue doing what we are doing. That is, construct and, as necessary, reconstruct a "Hinduism for Today" that can be attractive enough to a large number of knowledgeable Hindus who may do two things. One, they can enrich our proposal through thoughtful comments and suggestions. For, we always stay open for betterment. Two, they can help spread to their spiritual communities aspects of our proposal that they deem beneficial. This way, we would have done positive work, which may be useful to Hindus as well as interested non-Hindus. After we are done with our present task, we have the option to involve ourselves in different forms of benign activities for the benefit of Hindu community or the entire humanity as we see with our lights.

Reflecting on what we said about the definition we developed, I hear a broad consensus to the effect that it is largely fair and has wide coverage. This consensus should sustain us well in our journey ahead. However, as we go further, we will look for yet another opportunity at some point to review the definition in light of external perceptions of Hinduism we will be considering. Darshana, would you like to lead us into our topic for today's session?

Darshana: The topic is critical review of typical non-Hindu characterizations of Hinduism. They have the avowed advantage of objectivity and neutrality. We can be regarded as an interested party bent on projecting Hinduism in positive light. We can be easily attacked for wearing rose-tinted glasses when looking at Hinduism. However, we proceeded logically enough to avert such a charge. If a charge lingers, it probably hides a non-rational motive. There is no logical cure for such motive.

Non-Hindu attempts at defining Hinduism have a checkered history. Briefly, the label "Hinduism" itself is traced back to Greeks or Persians who called people on the river Sindhu in the Indian subcontinent as "Hindu". So, the word Hindu as a linguistic or dialectal variant of the word Sindhu is merely a hopelessly outdated geographic designation with no conceptual content in itself. This irks some Hindus . . .

Sanatan: Count me among them!

Darshana: I expected that, Sanatan. Hindus who resist such foreign and meaningless label, however, face the difficulty of finding an appropriate replacement that most Hindus, let alone all Hindus, would agree to.

Sanatan: I would propose the term "Sanatana Dharma," which means "eternal religion" and has been used within Hinduism quite extensively to designate Hinduism.

Navin: I would object to it, even as Mahatma Gandhi, my major inspirer, endorsed it for his own view of Hinduism. The reason is that "Sanatana Dharma" is clearly associated with conservative Hinduism and hence fails to represent Hinduism in its full spectrum.

Madhyama: Darshana is right. We have a major problem here. I cannot even see myself effectively mediating on the issue.

Sanskriti: One way out is to consider the way the term "Black" was accepted by African-Americans. The term originally had a pejorative tone. But its acceptance gradually led to the neutralization of the negative connotation. Is it appropriate to not endorse the label "Hindu" but at least provisionally tolerate it, hoping for a better term to crystallize eventually?

Sevak: We do not have many attractive options here. The geographic aspect of the word "Hindu" is outdated but does not have a built-in negative connotation to overcome. On the other hand, the term "Hinduism" has historically gathered quite a few misrepresentative associations outside that need to be corrected. No easy substitutes, however, can be identified. Given this situation, Sanskriti's suggestion seems worth considering.

Rabindranath Tagore wrote a book called *Religion of Man* and suggested that Hinduism never considered itself a religion to be set apart from other religions and that the very idea of religion being something that is less than universally human was foreign to it. He, therefore, suggested the appellation “Religion of Man” which, though, in this day and age, may be considered sexist. In line with his thinking we may consider “Human Religion” as sufficiently indicative and comparable. It is, however, likely to create suspicions outside that we are trying to appropriate universality by suggesting that other religions are not “human” or universal religions.

Madhyama: I propose that we accept Sanskriti's suggestion and proceed, albeit with a less than wholehearted tolerance of the terms "Hindu" and "Hinduism."

Sevak: Nobody seems to object. Let us accept Madhyama's proposal, which is the same as Sanskriti's suggestion. If anyone comes across good candidates for substitution, we will reconsider the matter. Darshana, please continue.

Darshana: Let me put the matter in the Hindu context and then continue on. Unlike most other religions, Hinduism does not have a single founder around whom all Hindus can unite. Unlike some other religions, Hinduism is not a centrally organized religion. Because of this it does not have the advantage of a single leader or spokesperson around whom its believers can congregate. Unlike them, Hinduism did not emerge at an identifiable point in history. Unlike many, Hinduism is not based on a few simple beliefs. Because of these significant differences, a replacement for the term "Hinduism" is difficult to find. Hence, the geographic accident at the etymological origin of the term sticks with us.

There is a positive side to consider, however. The word "Sindhu," from which "Hindu" is apparently derived, means, in Vedic Sanskrit, a river or large reservoir of water like an ocean. On the side of river, Hindus have worshiped prominent rivers as mother goddesses. A river stands for dynamic flow of life force nurturing the community living on its banks. It stands for openness to all who bathe in it and, above all, for motherhood, which is divine in Hinduism. On the side of ocean, Hindus have worshiped it out of awe and not as prominently as they have worshiped rivers. However, ocean stands for respecting legitimate boundaries of behavior, awe-inspiring vastness and ultimate destination, for example, for the nurturing rivers. All these are traits that Hinduism can identify with. Hence, association with the term Sindhu has the potential to develop into a considerable positive force.

Sevak: That's insightful, Darshana. It inspires me to add this. The word Hindu can be taken as a *parokshi-karana* of Sindhu. *Parokshi-karana* is a semantic process used in the Vedic literature, especially in the *Brahmana* volumes. It changes the appearance of a word to indicate a connected reality that lies beyond its denoted object. For example, the word *purusha*, which means a person, is explained as *puri shete iti purushah*, which means, *purusha* is one who lies in a fort. Western scholars called philologists surmised that this and such other explanations were a primitive people's crude attempts at discovering the

etymological origin of key words. They thought the sages were doing a pseudo-science whereas they themselves were engaged in the modern and genuine science of linguistics. Because the philologists refused to believe that these people were engaged in a respectable intellectual activity, it did not occur to their literalistic and unimaginative minds that the sages could be laying down stipulative definitions. In the above illustration, for instance, the term *purusha* is to be regarded as a stipulation to cover or indicate one who lies in the fort or, in other words, embodied potential energy of an individual. When you see what the sages were doing, you immediately grasp what they were trying to convey. Not seeing this, the philologists concluded that they were just ranting without knowing what they were talking about.

My point behind this seeming detour is that there is a Hindu tradition as old as the Vedic literature whereby a word is deliberately altered in order to convey a reality beyond the object it normally denotes. In the above example, the phrase *puri shayita* is altered to the now familiar word *purusha*. Remember that the sages did not have the benefit of a classical language that they could draw from in order to coin new technical terms. If a scientist identifying hydrogen gas for the first time in history wants to invent a new technical term for it, he can draw from the Greek language and arrive at the term hydrogen, which has the needed association with water. A Vedic sage without the heritage of a classical language like Greek or Latin that is enjoyed by an English-speaking scientist would probably say "witer" instead of "water" to indicate the hydrogen gas with its association with water. This is like the process of *parokshi-karana* albeit with the help of a classical language.

If, then, we regard the word Hindu as a *parokshi-karana* of the word Sindhu, we have the meaning that "Hindu" stands for the transcendent reality that goes beyond and vivifies a river or an ocean. With a great deal of positive associations around river and ocean, as Darshana just pointed out, this would further enrich the meaning of the term Hindu and associate it with deep respect, reminding us of the process used by the sages. This would be a good reason to support accepting the term Hindu rather than fighting hard to find even a remotely acceptable substitute which, any way, is not yet available.

Anish: This is very insightful, Sevakji. My respect for the sages has substantially increased. They seem like the scientists of the spirit, with the penetrating insight you provided. Is this your discovery?

Sevak: No, Anish. The *parkokshi-karana* process was discovered and decoded by Pandit Madhusudan Ojha, a giant of a scholar who authored

about two hundred volumes in Sanskrit, in the first third of the twentieth century. He is largely unknown and unsung because he wrote in Sanskrit. Sanskrit was like his native language. He was born in Bihar, educated at Mithila and worked as the court Pandit for the king of Jaipur.

Madhyama: Amazing man. What else did he discover?

Sevak: Lots more. We may unfold some of it as and if occasion arises during our talks. He was a great metaphysical thinker too. And, of course he was human and, hence, not beyond mistakes. Nevertheless, he was a remarkable man. If he had lived and worked in the West, he would have been regarded as an intellectual colossus. For now, though, why don't we go back to what Darshana was saying?

Darshana: Thanks, Sevakji. Ojhaji has all the makings of an intellectual genius. Let me continue. Although a worldwide Hindu Diaspora has in recent times clearly begun to emerge, the Indian subcontinent remains the historic home of a large majority of Hindus. The various holy places for Hindu pilgrims all over the subcontinent reinforce the special place for the subcontinent. The Hindu refusal to zealously spread Hinduism around the world through an aggressive missionary effort has strengthened the resident aspect of Hinduism in India. But, curiously, the fact that Hinduism is largely a resident religion in India, combined with the difficulty in defining it, led to what may be called a residuary definition of Hinduism.

Sanskriti: Residuary definition of Hinduism? Sounds legalistic, Darshana.

Darshana: True, Sanskriti. Law has had its own quirky relationship with Hinduism. But the residuary definition of Hinduism is proposed by some scholars who cannot arrive at a way of identifying Hindus in the way followers of non-Hindu religions can be identified. So, what they propose is that everybody with an Indian origin should be regarded as a Hindu if he or she cannot be identified as a Muslim, Christian, Jewish, Buddhist or other appellation that is easily identifiable. So, Hindus are the residues or leftovers after these scholars are done determining that they do not belong to other religions. This is the residuary definition of Hinduism.

Sanatan: That way a Hindu has no face of his own. A Hindu is nobody until it is shown that he is not a Muslim, Christian, etc. Again, even after

such negative identification, a Hindu is such in a meaningless way and this just because others cannot tell who he is. I find this offensive.

Darshana: Yes, it is hard to say that this definition is based on a benign stipulation.

Sanatan: I'd say it is based on a malign stipulation, with the malignancy in the head of those who propose such stipulative definition.

Anish: Sanatan has good reason to be indignant. Even a tribal religion confined to a small locality does not deserve such indignity.

Darshana: I am afraid it gets worse. The reason why I mentioned the residuary definition is that it is an intellectually bankrupt way of defining Hinduism. But it apparently arises from the difficulty in identifying Hindus through some external and publicly observable features such as going to a church on Sundays or going to a mosque on Fridays. A Hindu can worship at one's home shrine and hardly ever visit a temple. Even so, he or she may enjoy a high reputation as a devout Hindu in the community, compared to a "Hindu" next door who goes to a temple often but is, for example, a loan shark or a street bully.

Navin: And isn't that how it should be? External features are often deceptive.

Mahila: True mark of intellectual bankruptcy on the part of these so-called scholars. How strange that they can't think, or ask some knowledgeable Hindus! It's hard to believe that all they want is a superficial mark to identify someone's religion to make their, the scholars', life easy. What kind of intellectuals do they profess to be? They have the audacity to say that a Hindu is faceless if they cannot unearth the proper concepts to identify Hinduism. Wouldn't such a cowardly withdrawal in the face of a challenge count as a blot on intellectuality?

Darshana: The lesson is that stipulative definition is especially vulnerable if it is based on libel, offensiveness, denigration or plain old insensitivity.

Sanatan: I'd prefer to give these guys their own medicine. I challenge them. If they tell me what their own belief is, I will show them how Hinduism has better belief. As a good Hindu, I am supposed to practice

forgiveness but I will practice it when they ask for it. I will like to give them two counter-stipulations for each one that they hurl at me, until they stop their diabolism.

Darshana: There are historic reasons for the pervasive impunity with which Hinduism is approached. It makes Hinduism the clearly underdog religion among all the world religions. I have a hard time finding an anthology or textbook on world religions where a practicing Hindu is allowed to represent Hinduism. All other religions are represented by their practicing adherents and are presented in positive light. Hinduism is the only religion that is singled out for possible distortion by non-adherents. And this is supposed to be in the service of objectivity! Why are other religions not subjected to such ill-conceived objectivity?

Anish: I must have been possessed by some God to think that scholars and intellectuals form an objective community of truth-seekers! This sort of yellow scholarship does not happen much in my own field, science. Whatever the historic reasons for this outcome in religious studies scholarship, the community of scholars should forthwith correct it. The only way they can get away with such blatant prejudice is by maintaining their power over publishing. But if they persist, the time will come when they will become as faceless as they wish Hindus to be.

Sevak: There probably is legitimate reason for our indignation. I hope that we will not fall into the same trap as the scholars who detract Hinduism rather than accord it the same respect that they do to other religions. We need to show that we will not swerve from truth seeking even when provoked by thinking which manifestly violates the norms of intellectual honesty.

Darshana: Sevakji, I am nearly finished alluding to the classes of definition relevant to defining Hinduism. We briefly touched on etymological, residuary, legal and disapprobatory definitions. Two classes that remain to be mentioned are, one, historicist definitions and, two, analytical definitions. Western religions and consequently the Western culture have an inordinate attachment to history. Past periods do not interest other people and cultures as much as they do Western people. History is one of the two highest-ranking ways to understand and explain everything in the Western thought.

Sanskriti: Darshana, what are the two? Or, what is the other one?

Darshana: If the historical causes of something are given, the Western mind is likely to feel that the thing is understood and explained well. For all Western religions, God, who by far is the dominant central figure in their universe, acts in history to redeem humanity. Other religions have not accorded such a role to their God. History, therefore, has allure for the West that is unmatched in other cultures. Ironically, this has penetrated atheistic and secular thought of the West where, for instance, Marxism is a patent form of historicism and Thomas Kuhn and his followers seek to explain science itself as materially influenced by history. Next to history, logical analysis of a thing carries conviction to Western thought. If you analyze something and break it down into its component parts, you can declare convincingly that the thing is understood and explained. Integration or synthesis is not as important. But analysis is.

Let us turn this to Hinduism. It means that Hinduism can be convincingly defined for a Western thinker if its historical origin or development is narrated. Now this is foreign to Hinduism. Hindu sages did not care to go down in history as great guys. Hence, many of them even did not reveal their identity and time in which they lived alongside their creations and revelations. This irks Western thinkers greatly. It makes them get busy trying all kinds of speculative means to determine the dates of the extant texts. Also, unlike Western religions, Hinduism is not based on time as a linear process. It rather considers time as a cyclical process. This is another reason why Hinduism is seriously distorted when it is presented as a part of a linear history, particularly its ilk derived from Western historiography. Western religions, on the other hand, come out in full colors when considered as a part of history. Some Hindus seeking to imitate the West try to play the game of history. But they don't succeed. It is the Western game. Westerners made its rules and have played and "perfected" it for millennia. They excel in it. It works for them naturally and, consequently, so well that they think historicizing is a universally valid method that everything in the world must go through in order to prove itself. They can't stop insisting on this even as time and again shortcomings are pointed out, such as a culture subjectively valorizing its own history, victors writing their own version of distorted history, historians bringing their biases in their conclusions, differences between historians believing in or not accepting meaning in history and so on.

Hinduism is ahistorical in a significant sense of the term. It cannot be well represented through linear history of the Western ilk. It is natural, though, for Western thinkers to always try to understand and explain Hinduism in terms of its so-called history. The result is that

Hinduism comes out in unflattering terms. That suits some non-Hindus just fine. But Hindus can't even recognize what comes out this way as Hinduism. How many Hindus, for example, are even remotely aware of the so-called golden age of Maurya dynasty? They would rather talk about the four eons and place themselves in the Kali eon or *yuga*. Western historians dismiss the cyclical Hindu eons as mythical, valorizing their linear history. However, Hindus are the ones who come closest to contemporary science and its reckoning of the age of the universe. For, Hindus calculate their eonic calculations of cyclical time reckoning the age of the universe at billions of years while almost all other religions wallow in a few thousands of years of their own history and still try to pass it on as the age of the universe. Patently, Western religions engage in historicizing their mythology at the same time that their cohorts are busy mythologizing Hindu view of history.

In sum, historical descriptions and narrations of Hinduism have little utility and regularly fail to capture the essence of Hinduism. It is unfortunate that this continues to be done, however, although it consistently makes Hinduism look what it is not. Many native Hindus have been Westernized through generations of British educational system to think with the Western scholars and historians in this historicist style, which originated in Western religions rather than Western culture, science or philosophy. Even entire encyclopedias of Hinduism are conceived and constructed incorporating the distorting Western historicism of the linear kind. Sadly, this is done not only by Western thinkers, which is understandable, but by the Westernized Hindu scholars as well. This contributes to Hinduism having a hard time communicating its essence to the outside world.

Madhyama: Darshana, it is a sad truth that even after India's independence from the British rule, so many intellectuals are left in a servile state of mind, variously reinforcing historicist styles of thinking about Hinduism and cognate fields. If anyone swerves from this ill-designed orthodoxy, he or she is promptly labeled an apologist for Hinduism, or worse, never mind the critics' own aplogism of Western modes of intellectualism.

Darshana: Madhyama, talking about orthodoxy from another angle, you may be surprised to learn that this occurs, ironically, to Christianity in the West. Christian conservative concerns about family values come under various attacks in the West itself and the conservatives are labeled as decadent right wing radicals.

Madhyama: By the "progressive" liberal left-wing radicals? All this keeps me in business! My future as the moderate conflict resolver may continue indefinitely! But, sadly, continued polirazation dilutes my confidence.

Sanatan: I see that I and my fellow conservative Hindus are not an isolated group. It seems conservatives the world over are suffering a similar lot. Maybe all of us, regardless of our religious labels, should unite to advance a global initiative on the earnest and legitimate conservative concerns about secularism and materialism laboring under the cover of humanism and naturalism. But continued heavy internecine bickering among conservatives of different religions dilutes my hope.

Navin: Sanatan, I won't say that all conservative concerns and values are decadent, though many of my fellow reformists think so. But I cannot foresee any scenario under which you conservatives of different religions will ever unite against secularism and materialism. You people will keep fighting us reformists over indigenous matters. One reason is that conservatives of any religion hate other religions and, especially, conservatives of other religions!

Sanatan: Sadly so, Navin. This is an occupational hazard we conservatives face. Even though our numbers are considerable, exclusivist religions that dominate us worldwide will not help us unite. That is a sorry state of affairs for the future of the world culture of humanity.

Sanatan: Goodness! Sorry, Darshana. I should have controlled my urge to interrupt.

Darshana: I understand, Sanatan. It shows how deeply you feel about your convictions. At some level and to some extent, we all do. Let me continue. Sorry, folks, for my taking you into a tangent which was threatening to break our rule about avoiding politics.

The other class of definitions applied to Hinduism is the analytical one. Hinduism is "analyzed" into some exotic, eye-catching, superficial or negativized components like the caste system, cow worship, karmic fatalism, withdrawing from the world, life-negating attitude, obsessing with soteriology and eschatology and so on. Parts with questionable relevance are taken out of their living context and listed aimlessly, making them into a meaningless jumble. Hardly any effort is made to discover their symbolism or underlying principles, let alone realize how

they make sense together as an organic unit. Hindu attempts at doing this, excepting Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan's, have been rather raw, unrefined and mired in Johnsonian English of reclusive Swamis who have their own predilections of renunciate Hinduism. So they are summarily ignored as reactionary apologetics.

It is quickly and conveniently assumed that there are no connections strong enough to impart an organic unity to the isolated parts selected for sensational effect. It is then proclaimed or at least tacitly implied that Hinduism is a mass of chaotic beliefs and indiscriminate permissiveness of wildly divergent practices. Go study major entries on Hinduism in most encyclopedias and you will find varying mixtures of these two themes: historicist and analytical jumble narrations. Both are recipes for distortion and misrepresentation. Both end up showing what Hinduism is not. At least they notoriously fail to describe the phenomenology of the Hindu mind and the existential features of Hindu life.

Madhyama: This is enlightening, Darshana. You have shed light on much non-Hindu effort at defining Hinduism. You went behind the effort to diagnose what it is about. Most of the time, even Hindus take the printed word in a Western encyclopedia as unvarnished truth, without questioning or thinking about it. At least I now have a questioning attitude toward what the West dishes out to me as the truth about Hinduism.

Darshana: I would say in fairness to the Western approach that it pays to study Western culture and its products in their own terms, that is, through history and analysis. These two are preeminently good ways to understand the West. It is when they are extended and applied to very differently constituted modes, like Hinduism, that the historical and analytical methodologies yield poor results. Even many Westerners do not suspect that this is an issue. I hope, though, that those who are intellectually honest among them begin to realize the issue and, in the least ponder it. I am sure Western scholarship is not devoid of honest truth-seeking as a goal and should use our concern to reexamine its entire methodological spectrum to determine norms of application, scope and limits. We are not asking for a privileged immunity from subjecting Hinduism to universal standards; we're asking for a universal and thorough self-examination of the indiscriminately applied criteria and the assumptions behind their adoption.

Look at what we did here, constructing a definition of Hinduism. We used logic, which is a universal tool. Logic is well developed in Western philosophy but most of the Western academics in the field of

religious studies are insufficiently trained in logic and do not apply its norms when constructing their definitions of Hinduism. They constantly apply Western norms like historicism and less than honest means like stipulative derogatory analysis to Hinduism. This makes Hinduism appear opaque, unattractive and unlike what it is. This lack of training in logic and philosophy is another reason why Hinduism has not received sympathetic ears in the outside world. If Hindus were to apply their value norms to Western religions and thought forms, the latter would come out in pretty unattractive shapes.

Sanatan: It would show, in the least, how hollow the Western hallowed concept of individual freedom is, how they never examine it and how Western conservatives and liberals alike keep running with it rampantly and thoughtlessly.

Navin: I know Gandhian scholars like Kishorlal Mashruwala applied Gandhian norms to Western "science" of economics and the results were very unflattering to the West. Economics in this light turns out to be an extension of West's geo-cultural peculiarities, which are touted by the West as scientific norms.

Anish: No wonder economics, despite its desperate attempts to smuggle mathematics and calling itself econometrics, remains an utterly "dismal" science.

Darshana: But we respect Western methodological tools for the good that they contain and choose to ignore the rest. The West, still working under the supercilious attitude of its nineteenth century dominance over the world, has a hard time getting over the old habits and living up to its own norms of equality and fairness. The challenge for the East is to come out of its slavish habits of worshipping everything that is a running fad in the West.

Sevakji, I am done now with my task of describing very briefly some important classes of definition that are applied to Hinduism by non-Hindus, especially typical Western thinkers. With this background we can effectively discuss some particular non-Hindu definitions of Hinduism produced by applying these methods of defining.

Sanatan: I feel vindicated. What we learn from non-Hindu efforts at characterizing Hinduism is what Hinduism is not. However, Darshana's very rational analysis and critical articulation of the Western approach packs tremendous learning for me. Right away, I see its application. I

now understand more deeply why Hinduism I know is called *sanatana dharma* or eternal religion. It is so because it is timeless or ahistorical, as Darshana put it.

Navin: Gandhi embraced pretty much the same implication when he adopted the term.

Sanatan: I also see now the reason for the tendency I often notice in the Western thought to relegate non-Western religions' history as mythology and to narrate its own mythology as history. Its propensity to bend over backwards to show how it is embedded in "history", no matter how far-fetched the stories of its miracles sound, has been a curious mystery to me so far. The Western intellectual establishment strains to use its enormous intelligence to show that others' history, if inconvenient to its theology, is embedded in what it wants to call myths.

Mahila: Strangely or, maybe not so strangely now as I see it, I have heard Christian theologians decry miracles found in the Quran as unhistorical and, hence, spurious.

Sanatan: So, historicism won't spare even a sister faith! It's no wonder Western thought has no sympathy left for a starkly alien religion like Hinduism! In this situation, there is little hope for effective communication. Or perhaps I am being overly pessimistic. I need also to examine where Hindus have failed in their attempt to communicate effectvely.

Navin: I want to go back to Sanatan's point a little while ago that Hinduism has rightly called itself *sanatana dharma* or eternal religion. On the term *sanatana dharma* Mahatma Gandhi agreed that it refers to eternal truth in Hinduism, which goes beyond any historical period. He would add that it is timeless also because it is always relevant and beneficial to apply at all times.

Sanatan: Add to this the advantage that this brings me and Navin a bit closer to each other.

Navin: I like that.

Anish: Darshana has exposed the ostensively hyper-intellectualist Western mind-set in its true colors. Now I realize why Western thinkers are always talking about history so compulsively. Historicism is their

heritage and it is a part of their religious dogma. It is the way their God glorifies Himself. However, as a scientist, I feel that there is much good in the Western tradition of logical analysis. If their historicism comes from their religions, doesn't their tradition of analysis come from the Greeks?

Darshana: Absolutely, Anish. The great Greek philosophers laid down the foundations of logical analysis. But they were not just analytical; they also used the human mind's powers of synthesis. The tradition of synthesis remained a stronger force in the history of continental philosophy, but the Anglo-American tradition in Western philosophy came to emphasize analysis considerably more than synthesis. On the other hand, Eurocentrism rather than pure intellectuality often colored continental synthesis. So, it is curious to observe the emergence of historicism even in the field such as the philosophy of science where scientific truth is sought to be de-objectivized and made out into a function of historical forces. I think I already mentioned Kuhn in this regard.

Mahila: Some of my fellow feminists have even said that scientific objectivity is male subjectivity! If historicism is undermining scientific objectivity, one can say West's karma is catching up with the Western experience. I've heard from you, Darshana, that Western philosophy even has death wish, with some philosophers talking about the death of philosophy. Quite a sequel to death of God. Truly insightful, Darshana. Thank you for giving us an acute evaluation of the Western methodology and attitude.

Navin: I want to voice a strong echo of the group's feelings about Darshana's highly knowledgeable contribution. We now know what makes the Western mind click. The loud Western rhetoric so often drowns the real forces lurking behind its habits of thinking.

Sanskriti: The Western mind is always engrossed in its own history. West's own history of aggressive imperialism reinforces its basking in self-glory. I now understand why Western art criticism never stops talking about history. It is always history of Western art that they talk about, as if that is the only thing that matters in explaining a product or performance of art. They have no time to involve non-Western history. Seems like cultural chauvinism. Also, think of this: classical music is always Western classical music. Indian classical music is assigned to a residuary genre called ethnic or world music.

Madhyama: Good insight, Sanskriti. Highly informative, too, Darshana. We have greatly benefited from your contribution on characteristics of Western thought and their application to Hinduism. Because of the West's historic dominance and still powerful hold on the cultural state of the world, it is important to be well informed about its ways of thinking.

Sevak: Many thanks, Darshana, for a very useful and valuable presentation on Western mind and how it works, not to speak of how it extends to the way it looks upon Hinduism. You provided excellent background to consider our topic. Your treatment will enable us to understand and gauge the Western descriptions of Hinduism more quickly and easily. Let us get started specifically on the topic. Who wants to be the first? I trust that the group has looked up a few typical non-Hindu definitions, characterizations or general descriptions of Hinduism for our consideration.

Sanskriti: I got hold of the general article on Hinduism in the *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 2001 edition. The article is unsigned, as far as I can tell. Darshana is right. I see glimmers of what Hinduism means to me in the article here and there. But, as a whole, the article leaves me cold. There is no "Aha" moment. The article fails to represent what I have experienced as Hinduism throughout my life. My awareness, my experience, my values, my culture, my being has been Hindu from my birth. But I am unable to find myself in the article. I won't say that the article as a whole is offensive, though its tone underneath leaves you guessing whether some conscious or unconscious manipulation to misrepresent is going on. It seems to be written to convey the author's scholarship rather than how a Hindu understands and lives his or her spirituality. What is important to a Hindu is, in any case, sorely missing, while the article is studded with so-called facts of history, which are no part of the Hindu consciousness.

Sevak: It may be too much to hope that some in the group were able to find descriptions of Hinduism by non-Hindus that seem to show good understanding of the Hindu view and way of life. Non-Hindu presentations of Hinduism can be hostile to their subject matter. Sanskriti, can you give us some details about the structure and contents of the article you read?

Sanskriti: Surely. Let me begin by quoting the first paragraph directly from the article. It says the term "Hinduism" denotes "the beliefs, practices, and socio-religious institutions of the Hindus (originally, the

inhabitants of the land of the Indus River). Introduced in about 1830 by British writers, the term properly denotes the Indian civilization of approximately the last 2,000 years, which evolved from Vedism, the religion of the Indo-European peoples who settled in India in the last centuries of the 2nd millennium BC."

Sanatan: As you know I am a conservative Hindu and I have lived my entire life as a Hindu and among Hindus. There is nothing in the quote that responds to my experience as a Hindu. I do not know of any Hindu who would identify with what the paragraph states.

Mahila: Maybe we can say that the author is describing Hinduism as it is understood in the West where the work originated. It probably describes well what the Western image of Hinduism is. Of course, Hinduism as I have known and experienced is unlike what it says.

Madhyama: We have already seen how Hinduism is not centered on beliefs. But the article defines it as constituting beliefs and its attendant practices and socio-religious institutions. Hinduism is primarily about experiencing the spiritual ultimate. That cannot be reduced to beliefs, practices and institutions even if these dominate the West and the West knows little beyond them in terms of spiritual experience. If you divorce Hinduism from spiritual experience where it lives and focus solely on outward symptoms, the result is bound to be superficial and seriously misrepresentative. Omit the background philosophy and life values attendant on the spiritual experience and the result becomes a lifeless skeleton, which alone can be described as beliefs, practices and socio-religious institutions. All this can only come from an uninvolved observer who apparently does not care to understand what is going on in Hindu life. It is like a Martian observing that a classical vocalist does nothing but move his lips with wild mannerisms.

Navin: My problem with the description is that it identifies me as a Hindu in virtue of my belonging to the inhabitants on the Indus River a few thousand years ago. This is a speculative construct of Western historians and is no part of any Hindu's awareness. No Hindu that I know of would identify with this in virtue of being a Hindu. Yes, if a Westernized Hindu has internalized the Western speculative history of Hinduism, he or she might accept this description without finding anything in the religious surroundings that resonates with it. But it would be a travesty to call such slavish internalization by the term Hinduism.

Anish: Besides, it is amusing to be called an evolute of a so-called Vedism, which was supposedly the religion of some Indo-European folks. I know of no scientific evidence for such rank speculation that suits the Western penchant for having a history. If the historical origins of Hinduism are lost in pre-history and cannot be identified and verified, let them state so and admit ignorance of history. Why invent a so-called history, which just smacks of a counter-mythology?

Sanatan: What in the world is "Vedism"? My concept of Hinduism as *sanatana dharma* is certainly based on the *Vedas*, but it has nothing to do with the mythical Indo-Europeans that exist only as a figment of Western historians' imagination. My tradition says that Hindus were always a part of Jambu-dvipa, the Indian subcontinent. They did not migrate to India from anywhere else. Why would a Hindu identify with any belief that flatly contradicts his sacred scripture and its tradition as he or she understands it? The Western encyclopedias have done a great job of repeating the imaginary Indo-Europeans' invasion of India *ad nauseum*, thus making it sound like a *fait accompli.*

Darshana: Current archaeological research and discoveries seem to have conclusively discredited the Aryan invasion theory pioneered by Western orientalists of late nineteenth century. However, regardless of the historical replacement of the Aryan invasion theory, no migration into India is a big part of Hindu consciousness. In fact, the Hindu tradition such as it is contradicts an invasion theory. Stray references to Dasyus and such in the *Rig-veda* do not show anything conclusively, even when interpreted to suit the conjectural invasion theory. Plainly and simply, Hinduism should not be characterized in terms of what its long-standing tradition contradicts. Whether the tradition is historically accurate or not is irrelevant to the logical propriety of such characterization.

Just contrast this with the tradition of the Abrahamic faiths, namely, Judaism, Christianity and Islam. It clearly incorporates a certain history and continuity of it to this day and age, where the practicing adherents readily endorse and affirm their historical identity. They carry this history in their consciousness, in their mind, hearts, rituals and practices No such identification characterizes the Hindu tradition. Hence, the proper course would be to state what Hindu tradition and consciousness consists of, along with a separate statement of what may be regarded as speculative historical construct by Western historians. It may not be objectionable to even suggest that the Hindu tradition, though phenomenologically living in the minds of the Hindus as it does, is "historically inaccurate," if that is what the writer believes. One should

then clarify that the suggested "historical" determination is reached in face of insufficient data and evidence and is just one tentative hypothesis. Nothing short of this would be intellectually honest. But, as I said before, Western historical and philological scholarship on the subject as a whole does not live up to the demands of intellectual honesty or scholarly integrity.

Sevak: What is amazing is that no qualification or reservation accompanies the statement, which purports to be a matter of fact with no room for doubt. Whatever little hesitation it evinces pertains to the historical and not the substantive aspects. How interesting that the author is uncertain about the history but insists apodeictically on defining Hinduism in terms of such uncertain history!

Madhyama: I see the statement as a clear example of what Darshana described as the historicist misrepresentation of the Hindu identity.

Sanskriti: Let me read the second paragraph in the article. "Because it integrates a variety of elements, Hinduism constitutes a complex but largely continuous whole and has religious, social, economic, literary, and artistic aspects. As a religion, Hinduism is a composite of diverse doctrines, cults, and ways of life."

This seems to me like a clear example of what Darshana called the analytical jumble or what I would call the chaos theory of Hinduism. The only thing the author got right is the complexity of Hinduism. Curiously, though, the complexity does not cause any hesitation in the statement, which is as strident and recklessly cocksure as one can be. As Mahila said a little while ago, this is a cowardly retreat from facing the challenge of complexity. It corroborates what we have said here often, that many thinkers of Hinduism have thrown in the towel on defining Hinduism. What is disconcerting is that there is no admission of failure, on the contrary there is a penchant to pretend as if they got the truth.

Sanatan: The author apparently is not trained to think. He makes no attempt to thread the so-called diverse doctrines and cults into an intelligible whole. He also ignores Hindu thinkers like Radhakrishnan, Mukerjee, Bhattacharya and Mahadevan who have provided perspectives on how different elements in Hinduism cohere. If he cannot access the voluminous literature in local languages on the subject, he could at least read the above that have written in English. Like a wily simpleton, reminiscent of Shakespeare's Caliban in the *Tempest*, he just declares that Hinduism is a jumble albeit with some continuity.

Sanskriti: Along with Caliban, Shakara of Shudraka's *Mrichchhakatika* comes to my mind.

Darshana: An unsympathetic but honest intellectual would point out how Hindus impart unity to what may appear to be a jumble to outsiders. He or she may then controvert the attempts at such unity and, maybe, state that they are not representative of the Hindu tradition as he understands it. But to do that, he would have to contradict himself and imply a claim that he as an outsider knows more about the tradition than a traditional adherent does. Because this would be patently implausible, the author, as is typical of the Western or Westernized ilk, just presents the jumble as a matter of fact and makes it seem as if Hindus would accept such a jumble characterization as their identity.

It takes education, not to speak of hard lifelong discipline, to adequately understand one spiritual path. It would take much more to understand many spiritual paths and yet more to be able to compare them, which is what Hinduism is about. A simpleminded and spiritually illiterate intellectualized writing about Hinduism for a gullible public can in this situation only be self-deceiving, seriously depriving oneself of accuracy, if not a spiritual treasure.

Sanatan: I am sure Christianity is not described in such typical Western encyclopedias in such putatively neutral terms, which conceal inexplicable lack of sensitivity. For example, no Christians would accept a characterization of their faith as just a worship of a two thousand year old dead body. It would be correctly regarded as a superficial characterization sitting in inexplicably negative judgment. Right-minded Christians who come to know of how Hinduism is mischaracterized by standard Western encyclopedias may want to object to this. Or, maybe I am dreaming that Christianity would live up to its much-touted charity!

As a Hindu, I respect all world religions. But what I see here is transparently offensive. I hate to come up with a comparative statement that would open the eyes of Western scholars. I desist from stating it because I am civilized enough not to hurl hurtful insults to other folks even though they may suffer from an apparently incurable lack of civility that won't understand anything other than an insult to wake them up.

Anish: Sanatan, it is hard to tell if the author is a Christian or a secular humanist.

Sanatan: If he is a Christian, he lives to make Christ turn in his grave. If he is a secular humanist, he does not belong to any civilized society on

the planet and should join the apes that he thinks he comes from. May be even they do not judge their fellow apes so thoughtlessly.

Mahila: I hate to think that the unsigned author is a female.

Darshana: An exclusivist religion can hardly be expected to be charitable to those it excludes. Once you belong to an exclusivist creed you mortgage your sense of fairness when it comes to those who do not share your beliefs. Your doctrine helps you rationalize denigration and disparagement and, if you manage to gain power, condone exploitation and oppression of those excluded.

Sevak: I have read a Christian theologian who argued that a Hindu is able to respect other faiths merely because his doctrine allows him to and that a Christian is handicapped by his doctrine from respecting other religions.

Anish: So, if I blindfold myself and fall into a pit, I can argue that the next guy did not fall into the pit merely because he was not wearing a blindfold. Are these people living in a real world?

Sanatan: What are they smoking? If I eat too much sugar and get cavities, it won't fill the cavities to say with a long face that those who don't have cavities would also have them only if they would eat so much sugar.

Mahila: I doubt if they would take your argument as a sugarcoated pill. They just love their sugar. It helps them sling mud at others regardless of how morally upright others are. It's a travesty that theologicans would do this in the name of the great Jesus who was so magnanimous in forbidding them from judging even a prostitute. As Sanatan said, he must be turning in his grave.

Sanskriti: The article goes on thus, "Magic rites, animal worship, and belief in demons are often combined with the worship of more or less personal gods or with mysticism, asceticism, and abstract and profound theological systems or esoteric doctrines. The worship of local deities does not exclude the belief in pan-Indian higher gods or even in a single high God. Such local deities are also frequently looked upon as manifestations of a high God."

Anish: More mudslinging. If you have gone through the definition of Hinduism by Darshana and Madhyama, you can see how this statement distorts Hinduism in a patently offensive manner.

Sanatan: I cannot stand this Encyclopedic filth.

Navin: Once someone brought Mahatma Gandhi's attention to a book on Hinduism that claimed to be the truth about Hinduism written by a Western social scientist. Gandhi looked it over and said with his typical politeness that it was not a bad report by a gutter inspector.

Sanatan: You know that, as a conservative Hindu, I am not as big a fan of Gandhi as you are, Navin. But this increases my respect for him. These guys can't keep their eyes off the gutters. Yes, much in actual Hinduism falls short of its own ideals. But that applies equally to every religion in the world. If I were to become a gutter inspector of Western culture, what I write would boil their blood. I can call myself a social scientist, on top.

Sanskriti: Anish, this is what the author says about defining Hinduism. "Every attempt at a specific definition of Hinduism has proved unsatisfactory in one way or another, the more so because the finest scholars of Hinduism, including Hindus themselves, have emphasized different aspects of the whole."

Anish: Thanks, Sanskriti. Obviously, he does not care to look at those Hindu scholars as a whole. He is so deeply into his bias that it does not occur to him that intellectual honesty is a possibility. You are not going to see pink if you are wearing blue glasses. And then, you can read a text on physics and conclude that it is a congeries about heat, electricity, magneticism and so on and never articulates what matter is. If you do not have the intelligence to see the unity of physics, you should ask a scientist. If you cannot understand the unity of Hinduism, you should not discount but ask nowledgeable Hindus.

Darshana: It is lot worse with art, philosophy, culture and religion. Difficulty in defining them, even by artists, philosophers, anthropologists and religionists is no reason to disparage the subjects. That would smack of grapes-are-sour mentality.

Mahila: Let me turn the tables somewhat. Suppose he is right about the difficulty in defining Hinduism. We, then, would have the right to

congratulate ourselves in defining it to the satisfaction of at least eight Hindus who come from greatly diverse perspectives. But I think we were able to do it because we went by reason, fairness and comprehensiveness. Besides, we didn't keep scratching a lot of surface as others have done. We went deep to find the coherence that has eluded others and has sustained Hinduism in face of unimaginable adversities it had to endure under foreign rule for hundreds of years.

If you just wait until every Hindu and non-Hindu is satisfied, you won't get a definition even until the day of the last judgment. But that way you won't be able to define anything at all, except maybe geometrical figures. Anish is right in another sense too: they wear blue glasses and pretend to be surprised that things look blue.

Sanskriti: The article then lists common characteristics of Hindu belief. These are authority of the Veda and the Brahman class and the doctrine of *atman-brahman*. The rest of the article goes into selected thematic details of the history of Hinduism.

Sanatan: Same old, same old. They love to beat up on the poor Brahman class because it never responds in kind. They dare not do that to those who would put up a vigorous protest. Romans and Brahmans are in the same category. One is really gone and the other is virtually dead. Everybody beats up on them with impunity.

Sevak: Anyone read anything else that is different?

Madhyama: I read a lengthy article on Hinduism in the Encyclopedia of Religion, edited by Mircea Eliade. It is very high on historicism and almost wholly consists of explaining the history of Hinduism through different periods, emphasizing clusters of texts and the so-called movements, cults, etc. It goes into some philosophy but the tone is tacitly derisive. Apparently, the writer, called Alf Hiltebeitel never met an educated practicing Hindu or, if he did, refused to believe him or her. He seems convinced that what he has surmised about Hinduism through his distorted vision is the truth.

Sanatan: Another cocksure ignoramus. I am getting sick of these tunnel vision gutter inspectors.

Sevak: Eliade's is a very illustrious name in the field of religious studies at Western universities. He edited the huge *Encyclopedia of Religion* and has written many books, some of them on Hinduism. He was

considered a walking encyclopedia of religions in the world. A noted historicist. In books like *Cosmos and History,* and especially *Sacred and Profane,* he argued that the defining feature of religion is the concept of sacred, contrasted with that of profane. The view is superficial and symptomatic. At best, it is a face-saver for one who lacks depth. It does not ask for the reason why anything is regarded as sacred or, for that matter, respectful in any aspect in any religion. The simple reason is that it is connected with a deep, ego-transcending and uplifting spiritual experience that enlivens all world religions.

The Western academics in religious studies do not want to admit this. For, doing so would make them look positive about religion, which is anathema to mainline secular humanism and dogmatic scientism. They want to look objective in the eyes of materialists. The concept of sacred is sufficiently vague and arbitrary, enabling them to get their wish and look intellectual, as if they discovered something. It won't valorize religion, especially Eastern religions which are more obviously spiritual. Western religions would also suffer but not by much. For, for one thing, their institutional nature has downplayed their own spirituality; for another, their historicism would help them valorize Western religions and denigrate Eastern spiritualities. No wonder Eliade embraced historicism very intimately. For him, to study religion is to engage in the history of what he calls sacred. Quite a good recipe to succeed in the Western academia. Just find a way of eating your cake and having it too.

According to Hinduism, spirituality, especially experiential spirituality, is at the root of all religions. Again, this is not a matter of doctrinal generosity for the Hindus. It rather shows the foundational Hindu insight that deep spiritual experiences are universal and are not the monopoly of Hinduism. That is why a Hindu lacks the notion that religion is demarcated by borders. For Hindus spiritual experiences are a feature of human depth. They appear different only on the surface. And they appear thus because of the differences in individual perspectives and cultural standpoints by which they are colored. The beauty of Hinduism is that it is able to recognize it wherever it shows itself, while others make an incidence of it into an easy excuse for exclusivism.

Madhyama: Sevakji, this is very interesting and helpful in gauging how the Western academic mind works when it talks about religion. Can you briefly describe the methodologies used in religious studies in the West?

Sevak: Broadly speaking, three lines of methodology came to the fore in the twentieth century in the West, as far as religious studies are concerned. Some private universities were under the tutelage of

religious institutions. Their departments of religious studies continued to be called departments of religion. They could teach religion itself without being criticized by humanists and naturalists whom they overpowered. Their departments of religion could be called departments of theology. In order to look diverse and comprehensive, they added a modicum of courses in Judaism to augment the huge number of courses offered in Christianity. More recently, a few more courses are added in Islam and Buddhism. Hinduism is always the most underdog religion at all Western universities, so it rarely gets represented in any prominent fashion. If it gets some representation, it is through professors who are indigenous onlookers more than ardent adherents.

The colleges and universities that are not under the patronage of religious institutions had to look quite indifferent to religion, for most Western nations are declared to be secular states and are averse to teaching of theology, of all the things. They divided into two broad categories. They had to replace the title of departments of religion for departments of religious studies, making them look neutral rather than committed to any religion. Some adopted the methodology most friendly to materialism, behaviorism, humanism or Marxism. Let us call their mainline approach reductive methodology. They tried to reduce religion to things favored by these generally naturalistic philosophies, branding all religion indiscriminately as supernaturalistic. They used a big hammer of ostensive social science, trying to level Christianity which was their prime target, making it look as bad as they could, pointing out all its flaws and devalorizing its positive aspects.

Sanatan: So, they bred a bevy of indigenous gutter inspectors too!

Sevak: One must say yes, to be fair to them! While their criticisms apply easily and effectively to institutional dogmas of the Christian church, which came under heavy fire from natural sciences, they won't apply so conveniently to the modicum of experiential spirituality that survived the terroristic reign of dogma. Christianity, in its zeal for missionary spread, neglected or discounted its own rich heritage of experiential spirituality, which had flourished earlier in monasteries despite the Church's emphasis on spreading barren dogmas and propounding creedal theologies. Thus weakened by its own design, Christianity became an easy target for the naturalists who played with all kinds of reductions, showing it to be nothing but whatever they had little value for and looked barely credible.

The reductionist academics of religious studies thought that Christianity was the paradigmatic religion, the best they knew and the

best there can be, because it was after all the dominant religion in the historically most dominant culture of all times, namely, the Western Eurocentric civilization. Hence, if it falls, they figured that all other religions would fare even worse, lot worse. They thought religion was a fading fad of history and was about to be tossed into the garbage bin of time's inexorable flow toward materialistic progress of humanity.

One powerful figure that helped the reductionists was Nietzsche, who was a philologist and theologian in his youth but turned vehemently against religion. He declared that God is dead, meaning thereby that only an intellectually dead person would entertain belief in God in the modern day and age. Led by his legacy, reduction to power became a battle cry of the Western intellectuals. Nietzsche, who was relegated to inconspicuous footnotes in the Hegelian histories of philosophy, started to occupy entire chapters in the newer histories. Under his influence all social institutions, including of course the Church, were reduced to power games in one form or another. Many Western professors of religious studies are still busy trying to reduce even the deepest spiritual experiences to powers of high-end religious preachers. Forms of reducing the experiences to social constructs look especially amusing because the experiences are in the main nonsocial themselves. Western universities breed such scholars to become zealots and go anywhere thoughtlessly following a trodden path.

Another movement that feeds into this is called postmodernism, which has turned its deconstructive ax on everything in sight, including even science. So, if they see anything that has any social value, they would deconstruct its truth value by making it look like nothing but a social construct of its times where the powered elite ruled and dictated it as truth to perpetuate their power. All this is done with the help of a prohibitive and monstrous terminology so that a novice can be easily looked down upon as one who does not know or understand this seemingly profound but skin-deep school of philosophizing. It is as deep as you are committed to the ideology that supports and motivates it. Especially, political ideology. To round it off, Marxists of various sub-genres also joined in the fray, not to speak of Freudians who sought to steal their piece of the pie.

Madhyama: So, Sevakji, we are really talking about two kinds of reductionism here? One is the materialistic and scientistic kind of reductionism, which likes to reduce religion, our subject in particular, to something physical or even a behavioristic psychological drive. Another is the sociological kind of reductionism, which wants to reduce religion to sociopolitical power structures. Marxism would be similar to this

second kind, except that it will bring the economic power structure under a historical deterministic process.

Sevak: You are right, Madhyama. A fine insight, despite my not being clear enough on this. A very good and clear way of putting it.

Madhyama: Don't be so self-deprecating, Sevakji. You are trying to give us a broad picture, so it won't be surprising to see a few niceties getting lost.

Anish: This is very interesting, Sevakji. Please carry on, moving on toward the third methodology of religious studies.

Sevak: Thank you, Madhyama and Anish. But I do want to be clearer. Let me step back to recap a bit before moving forward. I am talking about three major methodologies in religious studies. The first is the theological method where you use a religionist intellectuality and generally preach an already converted choir. It just teaches religion in an intellectualized form. In an ostensibly secular state, it would be like a legalized form of religious education at the higher level. Negatively speaking, it's not much more than church dogmatics. On the positive side, it is as far as you can go constructing an intellectual understanding of religious doctrines.

Darshana: That's better, Sevakji. You are now talking in clearer terms.

Sevak: Thank you, Darshana. You know I cannot be as good a philosopher as you are and cannot have as much clarity as you have. You professors of philosophy are better at clear thinking.

Darshana: Because, Sevakji, that is all we do! And we do it for living.

Sevak: I am not as good also because I am encroaching upon your area at least in part.

Darshana: Yes, part of what you say can be connected to topics in philosophy of religion.

Sevak: The second methodology is reductionism. Here you approach religion as if its apparent form is deceptive. You try to correct the situation, showing what the real form is like, underneath the appearances and overt claims. If you are friendly to religion as the theological

method is, you do not have to worry about finding the real form. Real form is what religion says it is. Or, what you are told is the real form. But the reductionists think they have a better idea. They are not friendly to religion. They want to show that religion is worse than what it claims to be. If you believe in natural sciences, you would want to reduce religion to something physical, like neural or brain processes or externally observable behavior patterns or even psychological drives. For example, some believe that spiritual experiences are the same type as drug induced experiences.

Anish: So, this is where those scientific criticisms of mysticism come in, claiming that spiritual experiences have no veridical content.

Darshana: That's right, Anish.

Sevak: If as a reductionist you believe in social sciences, you may want to reduce religion to a social construct of one sort or another. The most favored is the idea of power. Social institutions have power over individuals or groups and, accordingly, they can dictate what counts as religious truth, for example. Organized church is a clear example of religious power. Hence, under this reductionist method, religious truth is nothing but what a power structure determines it to be at a certain time for a certain group. There is no more or little more to it than that.

Sanskriti: Sevakji, wouldn't it be out of place to say that this is where distortions and misrepresentations of religion or, rather, spirituality originate? Reductionism is at least one real culprit in the movement toward twisting spiritualities out of shape?

Sevak: Indeed. It is a prime cause of misrepresentation. But it is not the only cause. That brings us to be third major methodology. It has an interesting mouthful of a name: phenomenology. It goes all the way back to Kant who distinguished noumena which are the true objects in reality as against phenomena that stand for the way they appear to individual human consciousness. Hegel replaced the individual consciousness by historical consciousness and eliminated the noumena, leaving only the historical phenomena as the contenders for reality. He was also a theologian before he turned to a historicist form of rationalism, which also influenced Marx, although in a reverse gear. Of course, Western theology and historicism go hand in hand, as can be expected in view of the central feature, namely, God acting in history to redeem humanity in Western religions.

Enter a truly smart philosopher called Edmund Husserl. He was a mathematician to start with and then turned to philosophy. He wanted to turn philosophy into a rigorous science. He developed a methodology called phenomenology. You know I am simplifying a lot in the interest of general grasp and of brevity. So, simply put, Husserl would study the phenomena just as they are or, in other words, right as they appear to the consciousness. The first stage is to not mess with them in any way with any kind of interpretations. This is called bracketing or suspending all judgment shunning any presuppositions. These phenomena are studied in their raw form and described, listed and organized in a scientific manner. Then one can look for structures and patterns, which they exhibit. These latter are the key to understanding the phenomena, which is the final goal of the phenomenological method.

Anish: No wonder he thinks clearly and accurately because he came from the queen of sciences, mathematics. Looks like Husserl imbibed the true scientific method of approaching the world of experience.

Darshana: He called it life world or *Lebenswelt* in German. Oh, but, I'd like Sevakji to continue.

Sevak: Phenomenology became a powerful movement of thought and was being applied in many ways and many fields, including social sciences in particular. So, some in religious studies seized it and sought to apply it to their subject. Here, one has to make a good descriptive list of religious phenomena just as they appear to consciousness. Represent them without misrepresenting them through any interpretations, presuppositions or distortions. One can then look for patterns and forms implicit in them. Sounds good in theory. Non-reductive too.

Anish: Looks great in theory, true. But, as I think like an engineer, problems arise in application. What phenomena are religious experiences? Whose religious experiences are we to gather and look at? Who and in what ways identifies the patterns and forms?

Sevak: Exactly. On top of these general and logical issues, Western historicism won't let its powerful historic grip slacken. Those who engaged in religious studies from the viewpoint of the phenomenological method foundered on the matter of how religious phenomena would appear to or in historical consciousness. But the latter is a convenient pet construct of Western religious theology. It may work well with Western religions for that reason. A disaster ensues, however, when it is applied

to an ahistorical spiritually based religion like Hinduism. Eliade insisted on marrying historicism with a sort of phenomenology. But under this rubric, much of Eastern religions would not be recognizable for what it is.

There are limitations to the phenomenological method. Yet, it has a theoretical and scientific attractiveness that is not as present in the reductionist method. The latter is patently judgmental. The phenomenological method is putatively nonjudgmental. It deliberately wants to suspend all judgment in order to look at the basic experiences objectively. Reductionists want to cut off the experiences as spurious.

The objectivity claim of phenomenological method is of course questioned on a theoretical basis. What is the nature of the subject that views and describes the phenomena that appear to consciousness? Is it an unaffected vacuum, like Locke's *tabula rasa*, or blank tablet, where the objectivity of the experiences supposedly remains intact? Or, does some background that would distort the experiences in a subtle but damaging way always affect it? Are phenomena to be considered the noumena? Or, do the forms and patterns exhibited by them have the noumenal status?

Can you take this from here, Darshana?

Darshana: I will try, though I am not sure I will be quite able to quench my thrist for clarity here. First, let us apply the phenomenological method to the ultimate spiritual experience, which we previously determined to be that of the ineffable infinite. Secondly, let us also examine the method itself in this context to see if it retains its apparent attractiveness. Finally, let us try to reach some logical conclusions.

The phenomenological method involves distinguishing phenomena from the consciousness that experiences them. Husserl's dogmatic delineation of all consciousness as intentional or object-oriented was fatal in observing spiritual experiences for what they are. For, it is this subject-object duality that disappears or significantly melts down in the spiritual experience that we are considering. A serious question, therefore, arises as to the viability and applicability of the method to the item in question. This is the first thing we wanted to try out, namely, looking at the spiritual experience with the eyes of the phenomenologist. The case of disappearing or melting phenomenologist makes the phenomenological enterprise very suspect. If the scientific observer does not survive in a recognizable form, how can we have any reading of the phenomena, let alone a good reading?

Absence of prejudgment is the root of attractiveness of the phenomenological method. In the context of the spiritual experience

under consideration, where the true nature of the ultimate self is itself revealed in its birthday suit, all judgments disappear anyway by definition. But this absence of judgment is achieved not with the help of the phenomenological method but because of the nature of the spiritual experience involved at a level where the karmic affectivity is eliminated through the arduous pursuit of a spiritual path. So, in this case at least, it appears that the attractiveness is transferred from the method to the experience. Instead of the phenomenological method retaining its theoretical attractiveness, we find the spiritual experience emerging with the attractiveness while the methodist is taking a dip below reality. It is said that when such spiritual experience occurs, it takes over. It takes over everything you can even imagine. It totally overpowers everything at your disposal, including your this-worldly judgment, presuppositions and identity. What can be a better mark of reality than this? It is not that you are possessed by an alien entity. You see the ultimate being of everything inside and yet outside your own being. The phenomenologist dies a phenomenological death and emerges as the only noumenon there is.

Sevak: In other words, Darshana, the method withdraws itself to reveal the reality, which does not need nor can be captured by the method. The upshot is that the most attractive of the three methods, namely, the phenomenological method, has abdicated in the favor of the most favored type of spiritual experience recognized by Hinduism in itself and elsewhere.

To wit, the Upanashadic sage who says *neti, neti* or "not this, not that" as the only proper description or, rather, abdication of the disposition to describe, is saying the same thing that Jewish God says when He declares Himself beyond all names and says "I am that I am." He is saying the same thing that Jesus means when saying, "I and my Father in the Heaven are one." The mystery of the disappearing duality is here itself the revelation of the ineffable ultimate. The same applies when Islam says that Allah is closer to you than your jugular. And when the Buddha refuses to answer a leading question purporting to elicit a this-worldly commitment as to whether the Buddha will exist after death or not. And when Lao Tzu says that those who know do not speak and those who speak do not know. I must stop speaking now!

Darshana: Everybody!

Anish: And, in science, when Newton's further sea-shore pickings are burned to ashes by an errant dog and Newton just says to him, "Oh, you don't know what you've done."

Darshana: And, in secular humanism, when Russell's powerful theory of types is defeated by Godel, his logical atomism is shredded by Wittgenstein's tea-table talk and his trial of Linden Johnson comes to nothing; and all this after a glorious *Principia Mathematica.*

Sanskriti: And, in dance, when the dancer has not even left the stage after hours of vigorous movements, but has gone everywhere in life.

Anish: And when Einstein, after the gloried theories of relativity, is defeated by God's playing dice in quantum mechanics.

Mahila: And when Krishna, God incarnate, the reciter of the great *Bhagavad-gita*, helplessly watches his clan destroy itself in a frenzy of violent civil war.

Sanskriti: And when Rama, another incarnation of God, after portraying the ideal of human perfection, is compelled by his own people to abandon his wife, the dearest person to his heart, and is left to live the rest of his life in untold agony.

Darshana: And when philosophy, after gloriously declaring that it will go wherever reason leads starts telling reason to go where there is no hemlock.

Sevak: And when Christianity, after showing what God can do to redeem all humans, discounts His ethics and falls into mutually bickering theologies seeking the glory of a fallen elite called philosophy.

Navin: And when Mahatma Gandhi, known as the apostle of nonviolence, falls prey to bullets from a fellow Hindu.

Madhyama: And when Sati, Mother of the universe, immolates herself to be reborn as Parvati to regain paradise with Shiva on Mount Kailas.
Darshana: And when Meister Eckhart declared about God, "The eye with which I see him is the eye with which he sees me."

Sevak: And when Krishna, who in the tenth chapter of the Gita tells about the best things in the universe to be a fragment of his being and

shows how true that is in the eleventh chapter, dies of an arrow from a common hunter.

Sanatan: Wherever you see anything glorious arising in time, you can be sure that it will be eaten back by time. The lesson is humility, which is a common factor in all forms of spirituality everywhere. Human pride is God's food. He loves to eat humans' pride. He even humiliates himself, as Rama, Krishna and Jesus showed very clearly in their lives. So, when you achieve something totally fantastic, think that it too shall pass.

Sanskriti: Don't forget to enjoy it first. Then think that it will pass.

Darshana: Good job, Sevakji and everybody. On the matter of silence adopted by Sevakji as he recalled Lao Tzu, even Wittgenstein said that whereof one cannot speak thereof one should be silent. But instead of collecting reminders to remain silent, he kept devising language games to talk about. He survived this self-cancellation, not to speak of other sufferings, to say at the end of his life that he had a good life. I would say that the totality of his life or, for that matter, of any life is a vibrant symbol of the ultimate spiritual experience. In this sense, no life is lived in vain, although it may appear to be a very sad affair. In fact, the sadder it is, the more vibrant symbol it is. For, it embodies the paradox of why there is suffering or why good things come to end or why great things emerge and then submerge. The more baffling the paradox or, in other words, the more it challenges our reason and good sense, like God asking Abraham to sacrifice his only son, the more vibrant a symbol it is of the ultimate infinite. When you've seen the reality of something totally inexplicable, you are shattered and a spiritual self is born in its place. The ultimate ineffable is by definition not a slave of human constructs. It got to humiliate us. But we come out all right if we already are in its lap, ready to see and celebrate everything that it unfolds in its own way and in its own time.

Sanatan: Stop there, Darshana! I like what you said and just the way you said it. I am afraid that, if you go on, you will find a logical reason to put it in doubt yourself.

Madhyama: Well said, Sanatan. But Darshana's unending philosophical self-doubts are also a vibrant symbol of the Upanishadic spiritual experience. Or, if we just rise to it, we can see the ultimate just about everywhere, literally.

Sanskriti: Reason, in the final analysis, cannot imprison the ultimate.

Darshana: That's a good piece of intuitive reason and a good analysis at the same time, Sanskriti!

Sanskriti: You can't beat a philosopher even with her own sticks!

Sevak: Time to adjourn. Madhyama, can you summarize today's proceedings?

Madhyama: I will be very brief. We began the present session by reflecting on the strengths and weaknesses of our definition of Hinduism we arrived at in our previous session. There was a consensus that the definition was at least a good working description and that it excluded very little that was of value. We voiced a stringent criticism of the fake gurus who tend to overwhelm genuine gurus, in this context. The group dwelled on the sort of questions that should be asked of the Hindus, when testing the efficacy of the definition. Darshana introduced us to the major types of definition of Hinduism devised by non-Hindu thinkers. These included the etymological, historicist, analytical, legal and residuary definitions.

Dissatisfaction with the foreign geographic label "Hinduism" was widespread. This was assuaged, however, by Darshana's statement regarding the symbolism of ocean and river, which was further enhanced by Sevakji's allusion to the Vedic process of *parokshi-karana* discovered by Pandit Madhusudan Ojha.

The group examined two typical and widely representative characterizations of Hinduism developed by Western scholars. Both were found to be seriously misrepresentative and even reprobative of Hinduism and lacking any sort of thoughtful insights into the real nature of Hinduism. We did not go further into any more of the many similar characterizations because they tended to say what Hinduism is not more than what it is.

We rather went into the methodologies used in the Western academic discipline of religious studies to pursue what drives and motivates Western sophisticated thought about Hinduism. Sevakji explained the theological methodology of Christian apologetics, two reductionistic methodologies of scientism and the methodology of phenomenology. The first was found to be exclusivist and as such incapable of dealing with Hinduism with any degree of fairness. The second was found to be fundamentally hostile to all religion and hence discounted itself from serious consideration in its capacity of having any

value in propounding a real understanding of Hinduism. The third showed a great deal of promise at the outset but, under Darshana's close scrutiny, its fundamental premises were seen to be floundering at the level of the most important spiritual experience in Hinduism. Its grand failure at this level ended up vindicating the basic spiritual insight of Hinduism. Hinduism, however, claims to share the insight with all examples of spiritual seeking in the world rather than making its incident within itself an excuse for an exclusivist disparagement of experiences that it does not even know about. Finally, we went into citing illustrations of how what we regard to be good and great always falls and succumbs to the ultimate, which consumes mercilessly all our pride and prejudice.

The main thrust of the session appeared to me to be the way non-Hindu, especially the Western, ways of characterizing Hinduism were shown to be instances of telling what Hinduism is not. Frustrating as this is, it may be considered to be yet another example of what we consider to be good and great getting humiliated by the ultimate infinite bent on eating all pride.

Sevak: That was a very fine and accurate summation, Madhyama. Thank you. We will see all of you again for the next session where we will begin by taking stock of where we have been so far in this seminar. Please test out our definition of Hinduism on whichever field you happen to be in. We are not going to be doing any kind of a scientific survey, but we certainly should like to have a wide range of feedback. So, please report your findings on field-testing our definition. After these reports we want to start talking about the body of Hinduism, that is, a measure of depth and detail beyond the definition. Toward this end we will examine a spectrum of Hinduism, discussing conservative Hinduism, reform Hinduism and moderate Hinduism. Accordingly, the next session will finally focus on conservative Hinduism as presented by Sanatan. Sanatan's presentation and our discussion of it will be the principal item for the next session. *Namas-te*, everyone.

All: *Namas-te*, Sevakji.

SESSION 5:

A CONSERVATIVE HINDUISM

Sevak: *Om Tat Sat*, everybody.

All: *Om Tat Sat*, Sevakji.

Sevak: Hearty welcome to the fifth session of the seminar on Hinduism for Today.

Navin: Sevakji, I want to make a proposal. We have started and ended our sessions with traditional forms of Hindu greetings. Our principal focus for this session is going to be conservative Hinduism that Sanatan will present in his own way. Historically conservative Hinduism has been at odds with Islam for a number of centuries. We have wisely avoided politics and should continue to do so throughout the seminar. But we also need to show our good will toward all religions of the world, particularly as we claim that Hinduism essentially respects the spiritualities advocated by all world religions. So, why don't we add, for this session, the Islamic greeting to start this session? That would be a good gesture of showing respect for Islam, a great world religion, precisely at the moment in our seminar when we are about to discuss conservative Hinduism, which in many minds is not in friendly terms with Islam. I would like to know if Sanatan, our representative of conservative Hinduism, is comfortable with this.

Sanatan: Navin, I am at ease with this. Your proposal sounds appropriate even as all here will understand that conservative Hindus as a group would not feel comfortable with it. I admit I was myself taken aback a bit as I heard you make the proposal, but I came to see the propriety, opportunity and message in it. So, again, I am at ease with it.

Madhyama: That's great, Sanatan. We appreciate your understanding and participation. We are looking forward to learning from you today.

Sanatan: Thank you, Madhyama. I am looking forward to being as helpful as I can on a subject that has occupied my heart for as long as I can remember. So, let me say to all of you *Salaam Alequum*!

All: *Alequum Salaam*, Sanatan!

Sevak: Thank you, Sanatan, for agreeing to show the typical Hindu generosity toward Islamic spirituality and, indeed, extending to all forms of spirituality everywhere.

Darshana: Sevakji, shall we start with the two items in our agenda before getting to focus on our main topic for today, namely, conservative Hinduism?

Sevak: Yes, Darshana. Would you like to lead us on the two items?

Darshana: Fine. The two items are: one, taking stock of where we have been, inviting comments and suggestions from every participant; two, each participant's report on field-testing our definition. Since our major preoccupation so far has related to definition, would it be permissible to run both items together, letting the group talk about them freely?

Madhyama: I see everybody nodding on merging the two items.

Sevak: Who wants to start us off?

Sanatan: Since I am to speak a lot later, I might as well get this behind me right away. I would like to say something about how this seminar has affected me personally. It has been a moving experience, where I have picked up an enormous amount of learning, not to speak of respect I have grown for different angles from which people speak but always into and around Hinduism. I thought I knew a lot about Hinduism and had little, if any, left to learn. I was wrong on this. But I am still convinced that conservative Hinduism or, what I want to call *Sanatana Dharma*, is the center around which I see other forms of Hinduism.

Navin: Sanatan, I too have found a brotherly kinship with you. I never expected this to happen with a conservative Hindu. It definitely seems we Hindus can be good friends with each other despite our differences in outlook, philosophy and attitude. I think Hindus can develop friendship very easily with other religions of the world too, only if a genuine opportunity grows where Hindus are allowed to get close to them.

Sevak: You are right, Navin. This, I believe, works because Hindus generally do not have doctrinal hindrances in seeing and sharing the human and spiritual depth in people who are profoundly into their avowed forms of spirituality. Different languages used by the people of world religions are not able to deter Hindus in seeing through these

languages and focusing on the spiritual experience that all humans find in the depths of their identity. Let me clarify that by the term "languages" I mean not the linguistic forms but the ways in which spiritualities around the world have come to express and communicate themselves to their home bases.

Sanskriti: Sevakji, I would add that the Hindus are also willing to enter into, share and celebrate humane depth, which they tend to feel out and into rather intuitively. Maybe I am exaggerating, maybe there are Hindus who are not this way, because they are not even into their own religion deeply enough. Still, from what I see day to day, and I see a lot, I find that Hindus have a prominent intuitive way of relating with modes of spirituality not their own.

Mahila: Maybe it is more typical of us women?

Darshana: Beware, Mahila, your feminist friends, the anti-essentialists, may overhear you!

Mahila: Darshana, my growing spirituality has mellowed my own vigor of anti-essentialism. I no longer see anti-essentialism as a prerequisite or touchstone of feminism.

Sanskriti: I am sure you would like to tell us all about anti-essentialism.

Darshana: I am sorry. I should have introduced the term to the group before using it. I do not want us to digress from what we are supposed to do. So, I will be very, very brief. Essentialism is the view that most objects have essential properties that define them. Essential properties contrast with accidental properties, which make no difference to their identity or nature. For example, a sari has to have certain attributes in order to be a sari. At the same time, it is difficult for us to see the same sari again! There are so many of them and each one is different, right?

Sanskriti: You are telling me, Darshana!

Darshana: I never see you in the same sari twice.

Sanskriti: Like, who was that Greek philosopher you once talked about, one who said you can't step into the same river twice?

Darshana: Heraclitus.

Sanskriti: Heraclitus was right, for I don't step into the same sari twice!

All: Oh, Sanskriti!

Mahila: I'd like to see your wardrobe some day, Sanskriti.

Sanskriti: I will invite you, Mahila. But, back to essentialism, or anti-essentialism, that Darshana was explaining.

Madhyama: I would like to see its application to feminism particularly.

Darshana: So, we can see essentialism working in things like saris. But does it work with genders? Do men and women have different essences? Physically speaking, yes, obviously. But socially? Psychologically?

Madhyama: Goodness! I see the point. To say that women have an essence of their own is to say that their nature is different from men's. This would make it easy to assign them a fixed social role such as cooking or child rearing.

Mahila: You are so bright, Madhyama. That's the politics of it. But is there more to the issue than ideology? I have pondered this for long and I am no longer convinced that ideology, power and politics are all there is to it. Are women different simply because of nature or because of nurture? How do you tell nature and nurture apart?

Madhyama: Let us talk about this some time later. This has to be very interesting. We will practice an uncharacteristic exclusivism and exclude all these guys who are so quietly listening in!

Sanatan: We will let you, if you come back to the topic of our discussion!

Darshana: There goes the orthodox authoritative man!

Madhyama: Well, it is his day, so we will let him get away with it today!

Sanatan: Many thanks, Madhyama. This is a great group to be with. Always something new. My own life and routine do not allow for such intellectual creativity. It is always the same old . . .

Anish: Like the Western approaches to Hinduism?

Navin: Exactly. The other day I went to the largest library in town to research different non-Hindu descriptions of Hinduism . . .

Sanskriti: A truly serious participant in the group. I appreciate it, Navin.

Navin: Thanks, Sanskriti. I must have looked up about twenty sources. All sorts of encyclopedias, large dictionaries, compendiums, and anthologies and, of course, text books on world religions and on Hinduism. I must have spent about five or six hours. But I did not become more enlightened. They all said pretty much the same things about Hinduism. Very boring. Not much variation in the ways of defining, characterizing or describing Hinduism. The words are different but the substance is the same. The same misrepresentations and distortions that we talked about in the last session. Not much to learn from. Yes, I certainly picked up a few practices and rituals I did not know about before. But, on the matter of general approach to what Hinduism is, it was the same old, same old.

Mahila: I did not spend as much time as Navin did in a library. I spent more time on the field, because that is what I do professionally. However, the time I did spend in library was enough to say that Navin is right. There is a boring similarity to these Western writers. And, I was surprised to see some Indian names too, who wrote in a similar vein, although they use Johnsonian, Victorian English. They seem to be very much in bed with their Western masters whom they still serve dutifully.

Hey, but I do want to report a book by a Western woman that was refreshingly different. I learned a good deal from it. So, I won't characterize all Western authors as negative stipulators. I am happy that it took a woman to break the mold!

Anish: I would certainly like to know about that book, Mahila.

Mahila: It's in that series called "The Complete Idiot's Guide." It's in this silly simplifying series. I would have completely missed it for that very reason. I just casually opened it and began reading. But I was captivated by a fair, fresh and unusually friendly approach to Hinduism. The writer is called Linda Johnsen.

To give you a flavor of the book I will read a bit from it. Chapter 6 called "One God with Many Names" says on page 73, "It doesn't matter what address you send your prayer to. Whether you mail it to Indra or Agni, God or Goddess, Allah or Buddha, Mary or Jehovah, your letter ends up in the same mailbox. The one God always gets your

message. No matter who you are, no matter what religion you belong to." A bit on the simplifying side and easygoing style. But that is all right in view of the audience she is addressing.

Darshana: I agree, Mahila. I missed this book. It is in the idiot's guide series, but it seems to make idiots of the typical superficial negativizing Western writers on Hinduism. Thank you for bringing it to our attention.

Mahila: Let me read another passage. Part 5, called "God's House Has Many Doors" begins on page 257, where it says, "According to Hinduism, there are many entrances to God's house. Let's look at some of the ways inside taught by the Hindu sages. There's the door for people with dynamic personalities who've always got to be doing something. There's another door for people who are all heart. And still another for those who are mostly in their heads. Then there are entrances for technique-oriented people who prefer a systematic approach to spirituality.

"Hinduism is not a 'one size fits all' religion. Whatever your personality, whatever your circumstances in life, whatever your skills and abilities, the Divine Being will find a way to guide you to the highest in the universe."

Sevak: Mahila and Darshana are right. The book has a tone of an intimate friend. Its simplicity is deceiving. Behind its folksy language is an unmistakable depth of understanding that a typical Western scholar of Hinduism lacks. But the predatorial leopard in these scholars will not change its spots. I can see him attacking the book as simple-minded apologetics written for common folks.

Madhyama: In that case, he himself is the idiot who needs to read the book with an open mind. But I can see his elitist idiocy keeping him away from its intent. He should ponder the concepts and their depth rather than make the folksy style a scapegoat for avoiding the book.

Sanskriti: And, if he is stylistically challenged, let him attempt to write in such a style. He will soon find it's not that easy.

Darshana: You are right, Sanskriti. Making things look ponderous and more complex than they are is an addictive disease of us intellectual elites. There is much to the capacity of cutting the crap and getting to the simple core. I myself try to learn the simple communicative style. I admire Bertrand Russell . . .

Anish: I admire him too. Oh, sorry to interrupt.

Darshana: That's all right, Anish. I would expect you would admire his atheistic liberalism and humanism.

Anish: Yes, I do.

Darshana: I am tempted to digress into his philosophy. But I will resist the temptation. My point was to address his deceptively simple style, which he can use to write on any topic whatsoever. He wrote prolifically on about every subject imaginable. He always wrote for a certain number of hours in the morning. When he finished, there was no "t" to be crossed or "i" to be dotted. Such was his mastery of the language and, of course, subject. Don't misunderstand me. I have learned from him, but I disagree with him substantially on many philosophical issues.

Sevak: We might also mention that he got the Nobel prize for literature, which speaks volumes about his mastery of style.

Darshana: But he lived too long. He saw his own glory fade and end. And he did not like it. Became even bitter.

Madhyama: Our digressions are always interesting and informative. But we are doing more of it today than usual.

Sanatan: How did we get here? Oh, yes, we were talking about the style of Linda Johnsen's extraordinary book. Are there other books like it that stand out among the boring and negative superficiality that abounds in the Western literature on Hinduism?

Sevak: I would like to recommend one.

Darshana: I would like to recommend one, too.

Anish: So you two have been keeping them from us?

Darshana: Perhaps this is the right moment to come out with them?

Sevak: As good a moment as would come.

Darshana: But let us see if someone has discovered a book that too stands out from the usual hostile drab.

Anish: I want to report a writer who has written a number of books on topics related to Hinduism. I am not terribly attracted to his ideas but he is a very good friend of Hinduism. In fact he wrote a book called *How I Became a Hindu*. His name is David Frawley. His other books on Hinduism I saw included *Gods, Sages and Kings: Vedic Secrets of Ancient Civilization* and *From the River of Heaven: Hindu and Vedic Knowledge for the Modern Age*. He writes in a good style, which is not terrifically flowing but quite readable. He opposes the Aryan invasion theory and points out the lack of evidence for it. Substantively speaking he seems to know his Hinduism inside out. Very knowledgeable.

I can't wait to hear what books Sevakji and Darshana would recommend.

Sevak: Mine is not an outright recommendation, but it is as good a book on Hinduism as I have found from a Western author. It has an unfortunate title, called *Hindu Polytheism*. It is written by Alain Danielou. It was published in 1964. That is the edition I like. The book was reissued in a later edition but the changes made are for the worse and not for the better. Even the title changed for the worse. So, stick with the 1964 edition. The book explains the meaning, philosophy and symbolism of Hinduism through Hindu texts in Sanskrit and Hindi. Goes into the conceptual depths of Hinduism more than most other authors can. Almost authentically Hindu, also more than the most. Danielou has written other books on Hinduism. One on the four ends of life is not as good at all. The one on Indian classical music is good, though.

The explanation of the representation of deities is detailed and sympathetic. However, the language of the book is somewhat involved and opaque. You have to guess the meaning at times. But the book presents a wealth of detail of symbolism that is equal to nothing else I have seen coming from a Western author.

Darshana: The one that I would like to recommend is by a woman professor of religious studies, Barbara Powell by name. The book is called *Windows into the Infinite: A Guide to the Hindu Scriptures*. It is an unusual anthology of representative excerpts from major scriptures in translation. The book explicitly emphasizes the non-dualist philosophy of Shankara that, of course, is a very dominant philosophy in Hinduism.

Recall our discussion of the four principal sources of Hinduism. Powell's book has representative extracts from three out of these four sources, namely, *shruti, itihasa and purana*. It does not have excerpts from the *smriti* literature, however. On second thought, that may be

acceptable. Western authors always overdo *smriti* lit because they have an easy time finding negativities about Hinduism there. Although restriction to Shankara limits the book, the width and scope of the book is great; and that is really unusual. The book is very friendly to Hinduism and does not engage in interpretative distortion, which is endemic in Western writings.

Navin: It is possible there are, after all, other good books on Hinduism too, both by Western and indigenous authors who write in English. Maybe good books written in Indian languages should be translated into English.

Darshana: A good idea, Navin. Hope someone takes it up and helps them come out.

Madhyama: Darshana, do you want to bring us back to the two items you were leading us on?

Darshana: Fine. Does anyone have something different to contribute on their experience with this dialog or, rather, seminar of ours?

Madhyama: From what I have been gathering from my talking to members of our group, I feel that everyone wants to echo what has been expressed already. It's that we are drawn closer together through the seminar experience, which has been a great learning tool. We have already expressed ourselves and I am sure will continue to speak out our minds on where we stand on definition of Hinduism and alike matters. The group feels that we are doing quite well, over all. Everyone, though, reserves his or her right to speak out critically about anything that is said here. So, obviously, we are not shutting any mouths or closing any minds.

Darshana: Anything negative about our definition of Hinduism that anyone found on field-testing?

Sanskriti: I did run into some sectarian Hindus who would like their chosen deity or guru emphasized or somehow brought out in the definition. I guess this is to be expected. What do you say, Darshana?

Darshana: Sevakji, do you want to take this up?

Sevak: Sanskriti is right. One cannot say that Hindu sectarianism does not exist. All Hindus cannot be expected to be as open-minded as the definition may make them look. Nor can we expect them all to have even thought about Hinduism as a whole. Many Hindus have not studied the matter deeply or widely to form a thoughtful opinion on the full range of the subject. I would say we are on target if Hindus not particularly friendly to our definition are within a range of ten to twenty per cent of the population covered by our field-testing.

Mahila: Sevakji, I can assure you that, over all, our field experience, such as it is, is closer to ten per cent than twenty per cent. Even an expressly hostile field worker would have a hard time exceeding twenty percent. So, we have a right to feel that our definition is functional.

Darshana: Working on my elitist intellectual groups I also found a small percentage leaning toward a particular orientation in philosophical ideology. A few would want to emphasize yoga, a few felt we missed a particular form of Vedanta, a few thought we did not highlight another and so on. But a large majority endorsed the general drift as far as the totality of Hinduism is concerned. Many thought our definition adequately excluded other religions and included most forms of Hindu thought and spirituality.

Sevak: We can, of course, always come back to anything we have done, whenever it is warranted. In the circles I move in, I found a very low percentage of negative reactions as far as the definition is concerned. That is perhaps expectable. I would like to mention one thing as a general point of relevance. As Darshana has pointed out, our definition is not only descriptive but also prescriptive or stipulative. The stipulative part of it makes it a bit idealized, as one can expect it to be. After all, we are not here just to describe what happens in Hinduism. Right inside the definition we describe Hinduism and use that description as a base to raise a stipulative ideal of Hinduism as our contribution to what Hinduism should be like today and in future. How it is and how it will turn out is interesting, but we are more interested in seeing it do well presently and in future. Hence, we lay down a normative vision, which is a challenge for us and hopefully for all Hindus to rise up to. When I pointed this out to my friends who had misgivings about our definition, they understood and came around readily.

Madhyama: It was good of you to remind us of the dual feature of our definition: the descriptive and the stipulative.

Anish: Or, the base and the building.

Navin: Or, the real and the ideal.

Sevak: Thank you all for your constructive feedback and honest field-work. With a general consensus on the heart of Hinduism captured in our definition, it's time to move on to the body of Hinduism, trying to fill in some depth and details. As a start, let us turn to Sanatan to lead us on conservative Hinduism.

Sanatan: A word about my field-testing experience before I address conservative Hinduism. As a group you will understand and even expect that I would encounter conservative Hindus with attitudes not very open to empathizing with what they regard as intrusions into the pure forms of Hinduism. True, my experience ranges closer to twenty and at times threatened to get closer to twenty-five. But it settled close to twenty. Although many of my friends agreed philosophically with our defining principles of Hinduism, some felt that we failed to include the more conservative ideas as part of definition. However, when I argued with them that the definition has to include as many Hindus as possible, they reluctantly came around to the idea of not excluding or alienating Hindus who are less than conservative.

Sevak: As a rule, we should not go into the details of objections to the definition at this point. But, since we are dealing with conservative Hinduism now and are therefore interested to see how conservative Hindu mind works, you may want to tell us what was the single most prevalent idea of conservative Hinduism that the conservatives thought we missed.

Sanatan: Most of those who voiced dissatisfaction with the definition were surprised to see that we did not include the *varnashrama-dharma* or the system of social classes and individual's life stages in our definition.

Navin: Does not surprise me.

Sanatan: The four classes of individuals in society and the four stages of individual's life are regarded by many conservative Hindus to be the heart of Hinduism. Many of them are quite adamant about it. Some also wanted the *Veda* to be mentioned in the definition. Their knowledge of other religions is not what I am proud of, which makes it a little difficult to convince them that we need to characterize Hinduism in relation to

non-Hindu religions on matters common to most religions rather than things unique and idiosyncratic to Hindus.

Darshana: I can't wait to see how you expound Hindu conservatism, Sanatan.

Sanatan: Let me move on to my exposition of conservative Hinduism. I gave considerable thought to the way to best structure my presentation. And this included the *varnashrama-dharma*, as you can now guess. But I finally decided to draw from a Hindu thinker and prolific writer in Hindi that I greatly admire. His name is Jaydayal Goyandka. He was the editor of the renowned Hindi magazine called *Kalyan*, a term that means beneficence. He has written innumerable articles on Hinduism for *Kalyan*. Among the many books he has published is his commentary on the *Bhagavad-gita* . . .

Sevak: Allow me to interrupt you, Sanatan, but I have to say I am greatly impressed by his book on the Gita where he comes up with a very sensible and original interpretation of the spiritual paths of the Gita.

Sanatan: Very true, Sevakji. Goyandka has impeccable reputation as a conservative Hindu. A collection of his 241 articles, written in Hindi and called *Tattva-chintamani*, is published by Geeta Press, Gorakhpur. The third edition of this anthology came out in 1997. Article numbered 23 there, on pages 77-86, deals with the nature of Hinduism. Its title is "What Is Dharma?" Goyandka states there that a Hindu is one, who has most of the forty characteristics described in that article. I would like to present that as the heart of conservative Hinduism. It avoids the rancor usually generated by some of my fundamentalist acquaintances insisting on their favorite Hindu concepts. It also shows the essential human and spiritual aspects of Hinduism that go deep into the make-up of a Hindu who has scaled the mountain of spiritual cultivation in his or her life.

Mahila: Sanatan, I like your using "he or she" instead of "he".

Sanatan: Mahila, I would say in doing that I am not being a "modern" conservative. As I understand Hindu conservatism, conservatives respect women deeply. But in their own way, which may not entirely coincide with what feminists may want.

Mahila: I will be content with your respect, Sanatan, at this point.

Sanatan: Thanks, Mahila. Back to Jaydayal Goyandka's forty characteristics of conservative Hinduism. It's a long list, obviously. I would like to present it as a central expression of what a conservative Hindu is committed to in the spiritual development of his or her life. We can go from there and see what the group thinks about amending or embellishing it.

Anish: I won't know how I would embellish such a long list. I hope it is not as intimidating as it sounds.

Sanatan: May be we can organize and compress it. I am not insistent on keeping it the way it is, as long as we embark on a constructive analysis of its general intent.

Sanskriti: I want to take a deep breath to get ready to see what you have in the list of forty, Sanatan.

Sanatan: I will give the Sanskrit terms along with their English renderings as I can make out. You can suggest ways of clarifying the English renderings.

1. *Ahimsa*: this is generally translated as "nonviolence."
2. *Satya*: usually translated as "truth".
3. *Asteya*: this means "not stealing".
4. *Brahma-charya*: popularly restricted to "celibacy" this, however, includes much more, being almost identical with life of spiritual discipline.
5. *Aparigraha*: non-accumulation of material wealth or property.
6. *Shaucha*: means purity or purification.
7. *Santosha*: contentment.
8. *Tapas*: austerity or discipline.
9. *Svadhyaya*: study of the scriptures.
10. *Ishvara-bhakti*: devotion to God.
11. *Jnana*: commonly rendered as "knowledge." However, it demands elucidation.
12. *Vairagya*: being dispassionate. If swimming in the worldly waters, keeping one's head above the waters.
13. *Mano-nigraha*: disciplining the mind.
14. *Indriya-damana*: control of the senses. Not giving in to sensuality indiscriminately.
15. *Titiksha*: endurance.
16. *Shraddha*: faith.
17. *Kshama*: forgiveness.

18. *Virata*: courage.
19. *Daya*: compassion.
20. *Tejas*: luster, quality, aura, dignity.
21. *Saralata*: simplicity.
22. *Svartha-tyaga*: moving beyond selfishness and egocentricity.
23. *Amanitva*: moving away from arrogance and vanity.
24. *Dambha-hinata*: non-flaunting. Staying above hypocrisy.
25. *Apaishunata*: not succumbing to cruelty or insensitivity.
26. *Nishkapatata*: non-manipulativeness.
27. *Vinaya*: humility.
28. *Dhriti*: fortitude.
29. *Seva*: service.
30. *Sat-sanga*: keeping company of the good.
31. *Japa*: chanting God's name.
32. *Dhyana*: meditation.
33. *Nirvairata*: non-enmity, or being devoid of vengefulness.
34. *Nirbhayata*: fearlessness.
35. *Samata*: equanimity. Treating everyone as equal. Impartiality.
36. *Nirahankarata*: having no pride.
37. *Maitri*: friendliness.
38. *Dana*: charity.
39. *Kartavya-parayanata*: being devoted to duty.
40. *Shanti*: peacefulness. Inner peace.

There is a certain amount of overlap among some terms. However, the way Goyandka explains the nuances of certain qualities, it makes at least cultural sense to Hindus. Of course, it may not make that much sense to non-Hindus who may see repetition or overlap. Any way, though, the list is comprehensive. Goyandka says that the more a Hindu exhibits these qualities and internalizes them, the more or greater Hindu one is. Goyandka leaves it to each Hindu to figure out one's priorities or structures of emphases, presumably according to one's personality, aptitude, inclination and, I guess, individuality. It is remarkable to me that such a staunch conservative a person as Goyandka visualizes an ideal conservative Hindu as committed to developing these forty qualities rather than holding some doctrinal beliefs in a steadfast manner. If Goyandka has such a spiritual-ethical view of Hinduism, who am I to impose and expect a rigidly structured belief system as a hallmark of conservative Hinduism? I, therefore, decided to present this list to you for your consideration and examination as representative of true Hindu orthodoxy. It's all yours, guys. Take it from here. Questions? Comments?

Navin: I am amazed and moved by what a conservative Hindu can come up with as a central proposal for Hindu thought and spirituality. Was I barking up the wrong tree all my life? Hope I will stand up to Sanatan when it comes to be my turn to present reform Hinduism. I want to congratulate Sanatan on an excellent job. Goyandka must have an elevated and cultivated spirituality to be an author of such an enlightened outlook. His outlook hardly shows any sign of a host of negative stereotypes one is forced to look for if one follows the loud and noisy drumbeat heard about and against orthodox Hinduism in the media all the time.

Sanatan: That's very gratifying as it comes from you, Navin.

Sanskriti: I am impressed too. But I am also intimidated by the forty commitments. Can I cope with them all? Can I live up to it all?

Anish: I find the forty, as a whole, quite attractive and relatively dogma-free. Just as one would expect from Hinduism. I am pleasantly surprised that it can come from conservative Hinduism too. Can I pick on it, however?

Sanatan, Sevak, Darshana: Sure, sure.

Anish: I am bothered by the place of God in the forty. God appears distinctly here and is accepted and presented without an alternative. Sanatan, would you adhere to everything within Goyandka's forty or would you have some priorities and preferences?

Sanatan: Good question, Anish. Frankly, I made the decision to wrap myself with Goyandka not too long ago. I havn't had much time to think about whether I would endorse the whole list as is. I am going to think with the group and see how I feel. As a starting point of my own thinking, let me say that I won't insist on God as a person here. Not for all Hindus, any way. I feel free to regard God as a person. Personally I am very comfortable with God as a person and that is part of my faith. However, as a typical Hindu, I am going to respect non-personal conceptions of the divine, or of the spiritual if you prefer to call it that way. Of course, it goes without saying that Goyandka, like any good Hindu, will accept any personal form of the divine that any Hindu will choose from among the great pantheon of Hinduism. On the question of non-personal aspect, however, I would like Sevakji and Darshana to help me think more clearly here.

Sevak: Would you like to help us think further here, Darshana?

Darshana: I will try. The question is tough for the reason that we are asked to figure out what would be the proper thinking of a conservative Hindu as against a generic Hindu, so to say, on personal God . . .

Mahila: Or Goddess, for that matter.

Darshana: Sure, Mahila.

Madhyama: Worship of gods and goddesses is widely prevalent among Hindus. Would one say that Hinduism with its openness to different forms of spiritual pursuit has still traditionally insisted on some personal form of the divine? Am I phrasing my question clearly enough?

Sevak: May be the language doesn't but the point does come out well enough. The question we are facing is whether Hindu orthodoxy traditionally requires accepting a personal form of divinity. It is clear that Hinduism as we have envisaged in our definition does not require that. Especially, if we think of *karma-yoga,* or the path of public service, as a way by itself leading to the ultimate spiritual experience. That it is often combined with *bhakti-yoga* or the path of devotion in both Hinduism and in Western religions does not mean that the combination is spiritually necessary. Now, if the combination is not spiritually required but has the force of a long-drawn tradition, would this force amount to being a feature of Hindu orthodoxy? We cannot think for all conservative Hindus here. Some of them will surely say that a commitment to personal divinity is necessary. I would say there will be some, who may find that if *karma-yoga* is accepted to be spiritually efficacious by itself in delivering the terminal spiritual experience, cultural orthodoxy based only on tradition should not glue itself to its requirement of personal divinity as a rigid feature of its identity. Darshana, how would this look philosophically?

Darshana: We are getting into a philosophical tangle here, almost. How are we to define orthodoxy? Orthodoxy or conservatism has varied features. Spiritual, ethical, traditional, cultural, philosophical features. Does orthodoxy have a distinct social identity? In times past maybe it had some social identity when pandits used to pronounce judgments on individual behavior in an effective, almost judicial, fashion. It was called *vyavahara-nirnaya*. Those days are gone and are not likely to appear again. There is no uniform effective method of excommunication from

the cultural community of orthodox Hindus, for those who are non-believers in personal divinity but are otherwise in good standing ethically, philosophically and spiritually. Yes, we cannot ask the orthodox Hindus as a group to accept our definition of their own identity. We are not going to be that presumptuous or self-righteous.

Philosophically, *sankhya, vaisheshika, mimamsa* and even some forms of *yoga* systems of philosophy have had no problem being accepted as orthodox systems or *astika darshana*'s. This was probably because they professed to accept the authority of the *Veda* or, more technically, the *pramana* or means of knowledge called *shabda* or the Vedic scripture. If we accept *Vedanta* as the defining orthodox system of Hinduism, it can be pointed out that there are forms of that system, which envisage attainment of moksha, or spiritual freedom without any aid from *karma-yoga* or *bhakti-yoga*, holding that *jnana-yoga* is sufficient by itself. Some go even so far as to hold that *jnana-yoga* is the only path leading to *moksha*. Why am I dwelling on this? Because, *jnana-yoga* does not require *saguna* or personified divinity for spiritual attainment. If a system that defines Hindu orthodoxy almost single-handedly does not require leaning on personal divinity to reach spiritual freedom, which is its highest goal, why should one overemphasize the cultural aspect of orthodoxy that may demur on this?

Sevak: A good argument, Darshana. Just a point of slight amendment, which, however, will not affect the validity of your argument. *Jnana-yoga* or the path of knowledge would admit devotion to personal God as an auxiliary that purifies and readies the mind for the eventual traversing of the path of knowledge. You are right, nevertheless, that it is not an absolute prerequisite in theory or in practice.

Darshana: You are right, Sevakji.

Sevak: The only thing I can think of that may weigh against your argument is the other defining system of Hindu orthodoxy, namely, *karma-mimamsa* or Vedic ritualism. It was the most powerful orthodox force in Hinduism that Adi Shankaracharya faced in his attempt at establishing *Vedanta* as the prime orthodoxy in Hinduism. But, having said this, let me also undo it. Although *mimamsa*'s credentials for claiming to be the hallmark of Hindu orthodoxy are formidable, its commitment to divinity is itself under a big shadow of its own creation. It has notoriously maintained that the Vedic deities are merely material forces that have no option but to grant a ritual sacrificer's wishes which become horses by the force of verbal pronouncement of Vedic chants

and formulas. I am sorry if I seem to be harsh on *mimamsa* but I am backed by no less an orthodox authority than Krishna himself in the *Bhagavad-gita*, which lashes out at the *mimamsa* orthodoxy at more than one place.

Sanatan: Sevakji, I was going to lodge a protest against characterizing *mimamsa* so negatively. But your reference to the *Gita* silenced me.

Anish: I am intrigued by the *mimamsa* orthodoxy of Hinduism that regarded gods as mere material forces. *Mimamsa* followers seem to have thought the Vedic rituals were techniques to attain human desires. We now call it technology. The philosophy or the spirit is perhaps the same, although the efficacy level may be very different.

Sanatan: Anish, I won't dismiss Vedic rituals outright as not efficacious. But your point about the philosophical spirit seems to me as well taken. Yet, I want to go back to what Darshana and Sevakji have been driving at. They have made me to think that there is at least a legitimate way to maintain that Hindu orthodoxy has an option to accept non-personal ways of spiritual pursuit, provided they will at least tolerate, if not respect, the personal divinity of the traditional persuasion.

Anish: That turns the tables against me now. I guess I will be a Hindu in good standing and say that, even against my personal feelings against theism, I will hold Hindu orthodox theism as a tolerable practice, especially if it is gracious enough to accommodate non-theistic ways of spirituality. I see the point that what gets mutually understood is two forms of spirituality: theistic and non-theistic. If I were to profess a shallow materialism devoid of any spirituality, that would not qualify as a tolerable view. But I am not one of those materialists.

Sanatan: Good for you, Anish.

Darshana: Where does this leave us, Sevakji? But, just a minute, I have to interject this about the difference between orthodoxy and conservatism. Perhaps I started to run these two terms together in the last few minutes of our conversation. I am guilty of not distinguishing the two. Orthodoxy is a more intense form of conservatism, which is more dogmatic than rational and verges on fundamentalism or fanaticism that, of course, is the extreme right position in any orthodoxy. Conservatism, on the other hand, is a milder form and is not altogether devoid of rational underpinnings. Often enough, depending on the

historical period of a culture, it is highly respected in a society's intellectual circles.

Sevak: Thanks for the clarification, Darshana. I see your intellectual conscience pushing you to make the distinction. I need to say, however, that in the present context our mixing of the two terms has not created any misgiving. In any case, though, let us stick to the term "conservative" rather than "orthodox" in dealing with Sanatan's presentation. What do you say, Sanatan?

Sanatan: I cannot disagree, Sevakji. I admit to have quite a few friends who tend toward orthodoxy and some even toward fundamentalism. But I try to veer them off extremes toward a view that seems intellectually more respectable to me. So, even if I use the term "orthodoxy", I would mean by it a form of conservatism.

Darshana: Sanatan, I will try not to pick on you for not respecting the semantic distinction in a fanatic manner!

Sanatan: And, like a good conservative, I appreciate it.

Sevak: Seems it leaves us at a place where we make a plea to conservative Hindus to not regard non-theistic forms of Hindu spirituality as non-Hindu in a non-recoverable way. The same goes for the Hindu practitioners of non-theistic spirituality. They would be urged to not disapprove, if not respect, personalistic theism in Hindu spiritual life. I am sorry to come out in a rather tortured idiom. But I see a real issue, which can be addressed by hope and some work, more than by pious wishes. Given the Hindu tradition, ideal and propensity for tolerance, multiple paths and multiple ways of speaking about the ultimate, it should not be too much to expect this to be resolved amicably over time. On the other hand, if it could be resolved over time, why was it not resolved some time ago? May be because Hinduism as a whole did not face the issue squarely. This is partly a consequence of, and a price to be paid for, not having a central authority in Hinduism, either in the form of a person or an institution. Should we celebrate this or grieve it? Sanatan, you are the person of today's session; how do you feel?

Sanatan: Going back to the Gita's denunciation of *karma-mimamsa*, I have to rethink the matter somewhat. I want to ask you a question, Sevakji, before I respond to your question. Do you see the Gita disapproving the hedonism of materialists or the materialism of

hedonists? Where is it coming from when it criticizes *kama-chara* or wantonness and admonishes *shastra-vihita karma* or ordained behavior?

Sevak: Quite a challenging question, Sanatan. You are really making me think hard. Let's see. I'd say, the Gita is taking an issue with the dogmatic egotism of the ritualistic mind-set. Now, is this mind-set necessarily a mark of *mimamsa* orthodoxy? The *shruti* or primary scripture undoubtedly says *svarga-kamo yajeta* or one should sacrifice with a view to heaven and the *mimamsa* orthodoxy points that out emphatically. But the *yajna* or the ritual sacrifice itself involves at least reciprocating in good measure; whether it should amount to giving away the substance of one's assets or resources may remain a question. The Gita clearly goes much beyond the *mimamsa* concept of *yajna* and extends it to a wide range of acts that output generous energies. It also advocates *yajna*, together with *dana* or charity and *tapas* or discipline, as something that no one should ever give up. So, its criticism of *kama-chara* needs to be taken as a criticism of the attitude of materialistic aggrandizement where one refuses to pay back one's debt to the society and environment in reference to the five great sacrifices. I am referring to the daily injunction of giving to sages, ancestors, gods, humans and animals, called *pancha-maha-yajnas*.

If *mimamsa* orthodoxy is taken to advocate free-floating and unlimited material aggrandizement that heedlessly disregards social, environmental and personal integrity, then it would come under the Gita's attack. I do not think that it does, however. Even if one performs *yajna* constantly, accumulating and reserving a very long stay in heaven, as long as there is at least a reciprocal giving involved, one is earning the accumulation. This accumulation in itself, though, does not move oneself in any substantial way toward the spiritual goal, whether the latter is conceived in theistic or non-theistic manner. The upshot is that there is no limit to what one can legitimately acquire materialistically, provided one pays a fair price for it. That would be according to the law of *karma*. Spiritually, however, the amassing by itself will not help a person make any significant progress.

As to your query about *shastra-vihita karma* or ordained activity, there is a controversy whether it means ordination by scriptural text and, if so, which one. Mahatma Gandhi famously held that no such text is intended beyond the Gita itself because the Gita is a self-contained text and does not depend on other texts to supplement its philosophy . . .

Anish and Navin: Exactly . . .

Sevak: but others, among whom the orthodox can be counted, take issue with that, saying that the Gita is the quintessence of the Upanishads, is basically a Vedically based text and must, therefore, be taken in the context of the Vedic corpus. In this view, if the Gita itself is talking about *shastra* or scripture, there is no reason to isolate it from the Vedic scripture.

Sanatan: Sevakji, now I can't wait to hear how you resolve this.

Sevak: I think that the Gita's own indication of scriptural injunction needs to be respected if one is seeking guidance about all sorts of specific situations. However, the Gita cannot be taken to refer Arjuna, its primary audience, to the scripture in order to make general decisions about ethics and spirituality. For, that is what Shri-Krishna has been talking to him about, namely, giving him guidance on spiritual matters in general, while pointing out the need to cultivate virtues called *daivi sampat* or spiritual assets. So, the Gita is philosophically as complete as it can be under the battlefield situation in which it has arisen, but it of course is not an encyclopedic reference work, giving guidance in all specific situations that may arise in life. For that we indeed have the *smriti* texts or, for that matter, the entire source corpus of Hinduism and also the guidance from current *rishis* or sages, not to speak of one's *guru*.

Darshana: Sevakji, I have to say once again that you have come through with a very thoughtful analysis as well as a clearly desirable outcome. While the Gita is a great general guide to spirituality, it does not have to have an encyclopedic coverage. But I would like to know if Sanatan is satisfied with Sevakji's response.

Sanatan: Yes, Darshana, Sevakji has ended up answering my question and that seems to be as good an answer as one can get. Even in the matter of specific guidance, while the scripture provides guidance in a great number of situations, it cannot be expected to do it for any and every situation that can possibly arise. One has to focus the mind on the general counsel of scripture in order to determine lines of action needed in situations that the scripture is silent or not very clear about.

As to the indeterminacy about whether the orthodox should tolerate non-theistic spiritualities, I will celebrate the indeterminacy rather than yearn for an arbitrary authority on Hinduism as a whole. After all, there have been more than one sage and more than one guru in Hinduism. And Hinduism still survives. Still, as a conservative, I'd like

to see greater uniformity in the future evolution of Hinduism. I don't think I would ever be comfortable with a chaotic anarchy.

I want to see now if there are questions and comments on the Goyandka's forty.

Anish: I am sorry, Sanatan, that I picked on reference to God in Goyandka's list and started this rather uneasy thread in our dialog. On further thinking I find that God occurs explicitly only once, in item 10, called *Ishvara-bhakti* or devotion to God. Most of the list is free of reference to God. However, if you would, I'd like to know whether God is necessary in item 31 called *japa* or chanting God's name. Is it possible to chant a *mantra* without invoking a divinity? How about item 29 called *seva* or service? Does it necessarily involve service of God or a temple? Does item 32 called *dhyana* or meditation require meditating on God and His virtues? Where does Goyandka stand and how much would you distinguish yourself from him here?

Sanatan: Anish, God is very important and almost essential for Goyandka. God is very important for me but, now that I have come under the influence of this group and what I have learnt from our dialog, I am inclined not to regard Him or Her as essential. For Hindu orthodoxy, however, I would venture to say that God is almost essential, just as it is with Goyandka. For one reason, there isn't much of the *mimamsa* orthodoxy left at this time. Much of older, pure Patanjali-type *yoga* is now colored by *vedanta* and hence has replaced its rather marginalized *ishvara* or God with a quite substantial *ishvara* borrowed from *vedanta*.

The list is Goyandka's but I will be the one who will interpret it here in view of my own lights. So, I'd rather not implicate him when I venture forth to present Hindu conservatism. Much as I respect him, I am using his list as a spring-board rather and not as a firm ground on which I want to stand. I would like to make my presentation through responses to the questions and comments I receive from the group.

Anish, it is indeed possible to have a *mantra* that makes no explicit reference to God. A famous one is *soham* or "That is me". The reference here can be construed in terms of one's deepest self being identical with the ultimate essence of the universe. Even if near-nontheism of *sankhya, vaisheshika* and Patanjali's *yoga* is hardly extant any more, I don't see anything non-Hindu like in following their lead in formulating one's spiritual path. Because these have claimed to be *astika* or Vedic philosophies, the orthodox may not regard them as their own but that does not mean that they would be regarded as non-Hindu.

Service implied in item 29 can indeed be the service work for society, humanity or the planet. *Vedanta* orthodoxy of course would include Adi Shankaracharya who has done more than almost anyone in giving a firm footing to *sanatana dharma* or the eternal conservative Hinduism. Darshana can correct me but I surmise that he would not say that his concept of *jnana-yoga* or path of knowledge requires devotion to God as a pre-requisite.

Darshana: Anish, Sanatan, my understanding of Shankaracharya in this context is that either selfless service or devotion to God can be a sufficient preparation to embark on path of knowledge. Of course, for him only *jnana* or knowledge delivers enlightenment; neither selfless action nor devotion to God can do it by itself, even as they can contribute by way of purifying and readying the mind for the travel on the path of knowledge. Sevakji already vouched for this just a while ago.

Sanatan: Thanks, Darshana. Forgive our oversight. In this seminar, so much is happening and so much is going on in the mind as a result that we are struggling to absorb it all in one piece. I will sum up my response to Anish's questions by saying that *seva, japa* and *dhyana* can be practiced without reference to God. The orthodox may not be wholly comfortable with the absence of God there, but at least the knowledgeable among them won't denounce them as un-Hindu. Any way, I don't feel that Anish aspires to be counted among the orthodox?!

Anish: You are right, Sanatan, I have no such aspirations. I am happy to be regardeded as a maverick Hindu by them!

Mahila: Sanatan, I am interested to know how you view *dharma* or the duties pertaining to *varna* or social class and *ashrama* or stages of life. Even as you, following Goyandka, have not required them as part of Hindu conservatism, they indeed are viewed as essential by many of the orthodox in this day and age, not to speak of a centuries long tradition that has regarded them as such.

Sanatan: Mahila, let me take the life-stages first, because that will be brief. The four stages of being a student, householder, retiree and recluse are not very controversial. They are not even mandatory; at least not all of them. The stage of being a student is universally accepted in today's age. It of course should not be denied to women. As to what and how one is to be taught, philosophy of education has points of debate. The stage of householder is the least controversial. Being a retiree in the

forest and leading a semi-spiritual life of service to the outlying community in the third stage of life should not evoke any negative judgments either. The stage of being a recluse evokes disdain from those who think it to be socio-economically parasitical. But, keep in mind, as the Buddha too argued, that the society can benefit substantially from the wisdom, teachings and spiritual experience of the recluses who devote themselves totally to spiritual pursuit. Again, it is not mandatory and a vast majority hardly progress to the point of considering it, let alone taking a leap into renunciation. In fact, some do not even evolve to considering retirement of any kind. Renouncing in the middle of household responsibilities is discouraged for good reasons. Things are not so free of controversy, however, when we come to *varna* or social class.

Mahila, on social class, the caste system is the one that is made to bear the brunt of much opprobrium. A great deal of politics and economic rivalry among the caste groups continues to this day. Besides, jockeying for social status and recognition of superiority also is endemic. A part of all this is either sourced into or blamed on Hinduism as a religion. None of this would be supported or recommended if one were to take up Goyandka's forty items to be cultivated in one's life. Take, for example, the very first item in the list, called *ahimsa* or nonviolence. Much of current caste behavior includes hatred and enmity leading to a lot of verbal and at least some physical violence. The third item of *asteya* or non-stealing would put an end to all forms of exploitation which amount to stealing in one way or another. Items 5, 7, 12, 13, 14, 17, 19, 22, 25, 33, 35, 37 and 38 clearly argue against any behavior of the type that is perpetrated in the name of caste superiority.

Goyandka holds that caste distinctions should be based on both aptitude and heredity. He leaves it very vague as to which should have the priority. I am not comfortable with this ambivalence. In this day and age, where jobs are very mobile, it is difficult to maintain vocational aspect of caste system as it used to exist in a vocationally stable society. What is left to exist in a large way is the system of marrying within one's caste community. This is where heredity works as an overriding consideration.

A distinction between *varna* or class on the one hand and *jati* or caste on the other is made often, implying that it is the social functionality of class and not the hereditary structure of caste that finds a prominent place in the Hindu scriptures. Accordingly, Hinduism as a religion would be "exonerated" from the unjust excesses relating to caste-oriented behavior. But Hinduism as a society cannot escape the charge on the basis of this distinction. From my viewpoint, where I find

myself with a deep Hindu identity, I cannot feel much relief from saving my religion only to blame my society. Both my spirituality and my community are important to me.

I am not, and won't want to be, blind to obvious injustices perpetrated in the name of caste and religion. But I want to emphasize that the virtues and qualities that a conservative Hindu is expected to cultivate do not leave room for such injustices. To the extent injustice is perpetrated in the name of orthodoxy, I can only deplore it even if it involves castigating some in my community who are participating in such. As I see it, while true conservatism cannot support unjust economic, social and political conduct as religiously validated or permitted, I reserve my right to characterize as unjust any particular conduct or class of conduct. For, at least some times certain aspects of caste behavior are called into question but at the heart of the matter there is a conflict of values. People call unjust what they just don't agree with on value grounds.

Sanskriti: I and some others here would like to know exactly what you are referring to as value conflicts rather than injustices.

Sanatan: Take, for instance, the tradition of arranged marriage. There is a complex system of conventions that underpins the Hindu institution of arranged marriage. Those who are enamored with the Western dating system just treat arranged marriage as if it is inherently criminal. If you think and observe, you will find quite a bit of problems with the dating system too. Like, date rape, for example. Both systems deserve some changes but do not have to be branded as criminal or licentious. Hindu orthodoxy would of course castigate dating system as licentious and promiscuous in retaliation. There is no end to the argument in this conflict of values. I just want to say that a conflict of values does not warrant any of the conflicting values to be called names in a rush for a hasty judgment call.

Mahila: Sanatan, don't you think a dialog such as we are having can benefit the Hindu community as a whole and possibly bring about a clarification of values to see how different value systems can understand each other better and live together for a more harmonious communal life?

Sanatan: Mahila, I cannot agree with you more. A sustained dialog of this nature, where community leaders seek to work toward mutual understanding, would go a long way toward establishing a society that

can eventuate into a harmonious community. In fact, you and Sanskriti can team up with other leaders on this.

Sanskriti: Part of work to be done, sure.

Sevak: We barred politics from our dialog. We got into some here, sort of. But we did that in a good way. I agree much constructive work needs to be done in this area. We will discover that in developing Hinduism for Today we will find a number of similar areas where such work will be seen as part of a future agenda to be pursued in earnest. We should make note of it and move forward accordingly. Coming to think of it, we can include in this agenda our previous dialog point where we were expressing a hope that the orthodox community can come to terms with non-theistic forms of spirituality. Maybe, Sanatan and Anish can bring the leaders together for a dialog aiming at bridging their distance.

Anish, Sanatan: Sure, Sevakji.

Sanatan: One more item needs articulation in regard to the caste system, particularly its historical origin. The latter is shrouded in mystery. British were probably the first outsider group to raise the issue of Hindu discrimination based on caste. The Hindu response came primarily from British educated elite who developed the theory that ancient sages basically formulated the *varna* system of four social classes for the sake of social functionality. This left open the question as to how and when the later *jati* system of enormous complexity arose. The customary answer was that *varna-sankara* or illicit comingling of classes led to the castes.

Recently a new theory has arisen, which states that caste system is prehistoric and has been there previous to the class structure. It is said that the latter was sought to be imposed by sages on the caste system as an attempt to reform and simplify the caste based society. Both theories get mired in more controversy when the theory of Aryan invasion is imported into the explanatory picture. So, you can imagine how the debate can get quite wild here. This is another eample of how things can go awry when we try to explain them through history.

Anish: This sort of theorizing is fascinating, Sanatan. It is informative and makes for some hard food for thought. Thank you for sharing it with us.

Sevak: Sanatan, I'd like to see you develop some details on the meanings of the forty items in Goyandka's list. A brief narration of what is involved in the items can help us understand what exactly is being expected of a conservative Hindu who follows Goyandka to cultivate the forty items.

Sanatan: Sevakji, I will attempt a brief narration. But, again, let me say that I am going to give my own meanings to the items.

Sevak: That is just fine, Sanatan.

Sanatan: Let us start with the first item, *ahimsa,* which involves nonviolence to all living beings, in thought, speech and action. The minimum expected would be not taking life in any form. The second item, *satya*, is usually rendered as "truth" and means that we should speak the truth at all times. I should add that, following the Upanishadic admonition, we should speak the truth in a pleasing manner so that it does not offend others. I myself find it hard to follow. You should understand that I do not want to project myself as somebody who has perfected himself in his development as a good conservative Hindu. Any way, I need to keep trying and stay on the path all the time.

Madhyama: Sanatan, we are glad you are among us to represent conservative Hinduism. I look for learning from your repertoire of knowledge on the subject. We are all seekers rather than accomplished sages, with the possible exception of Sevakji or Darshana.

Sevak: No way, please exclude me from this possibility! Mere amount of knowledge or information does not by itself make a wise sage.

Darshana: Exclude me, too! I carry an oversize load of information. When I understand it as a whole and place it in one coherent piece, I can be said to have turned it into knowledge. When I figure out the way of applying that knowledge in life, I will have wisdom. When I practice wisdom to fullness, I will be a sage. I don't think I will achieve any of these in this lifetime.

Madhyama: Your modesty inspires us, Sevakji and Darshana. It tells us how much farther we have to go ourselves.

Sanatan: The third item is *asteya*, meaning non-stealing. It involves not depriving anyone of their property or resources. The fourth, called

brahmacharya, is controversial. Many think it means nothing short of or nothing more than celibacy. But the term literally indicates conduct of one who seeks *Brahman* or the highest spiritual reality. This, therefore, may include all aspects of a spiritual path. Now, celibacy used to be a vital component of the life of anyone in the student stage which is where one learns about *Brahman* and hopefully forms or plans one's eventual spiritual path.

There also is another aspect of *brahma-charya*. A householder who is married and follows a spiritual path does not have to desist from sex altogether in order to be following *brahma-charya*, for it is held that marital sex does not violate the restraint involved in the concept of celibacy invoked here. To some orthodox this seems like a convenient escape but they too would concede that at least reproductive sex should be exempted.

Sanskriti: I'd exempt all marital sex, not just reproductive sex. But may be that will keep me from being counted as a conservative Hindu, let alone an orthodox Hindu?

Sanatan: I am content to say that this point is debatable without myself making a decision about it. But I would like to hear something from Navin on the matter.

Navin: I knew this was coming to me. As you all know, Mahatma Gandhi, who is my idealized mentor, recommended and himself came to practice strict celibacy even within marriage. He indeed had to handle a storm of controversy on that. Sanatan, could you please let me defer the matter until I present reform Hinduism later?

Sanatan: What do you say, Sevakji?

Sevak: We can possibly embark on a big digression if we ask Navin to go into his perspective on the subject. So, though somewhat reluctantly, I would like to pick this up when Navin presents reform Hinduism to us.

Anish: I don't mind kicking this can down the road.

Sanatan: Let me proceed further with the list. The next item is *aparigraha*, which means non-aggrandizement. An orthodox Hindu should not accumulate wealth. Goyandka opines that for a householder this does not forbid him from contributing to a fair-sized retirement plan. But a level of accumulation going clearly beyond one's moderate needs

and emaciated wants indicates possessiveness and is, therefore, anathema. *Shaucha*, or purity has two aspects: it involves cleanliness at external as well as internal levels. We are supposed to keep ourselves clean physically with regard to the body and surroundings where we live. We also need to practice internal cleanliness which means examining the mind, speech and action daily to make sure that we come up clean at least each in one's own honest self-view.

Santosha is contentedness, suggesting an absence of craving. It is an attitude to cultivate in relation to whatever we get, at all times. A persistent sense of dissatisfaction with what we end up with is unhealthy. It is stressful and distracts from the spiritual pursuit. If you are a believer in God, and a conservative Hindu most likely is, you can say that what you get is God's wish if it is not very pleasing. It will make you content and stress-free.

Sanskriti: What do you say when you get what is very pleasing?

Sanatan: Then you say that it is God's grace.

Sanskriti: That's good, Sanatan, I like that.

Sanatan: Thanks, Sanskriti. *Tapas*, which is next in the list, involves being ready to endure suffering in the line of duty. As a Hindu I should live a plain life and he or she does not flee when life delivers some hard knocks. I am pampering my body if I cannot stand a little heat and want air-conditioning at all times in summer. I am also with Mother Nature, when I accept a little heat, or cold, for that matter. In the least I should learn to live simply, if not austerely, and impose a measure of discipline on myself. I do not need to torture my body, however. Whether or not I cultivate austerity, at the minimum, as a practitioner of *tapas*, I should not run from suffering, if and when fulfilling my responsibilities entails suffering.

Svadhyaya means studying the scriptures or other literature that is morally and spiritually uplifting. This should be done on a regular basis, preferably every day. *Ishvara-bhakti*, which we already discussed, includes spending a measure of time daily in prayer or devotion to God. More the better, but of course not neglecting one's duties. In simple terms, love God and keep faith. *Jnana* means knowledge and in this context it means the intelligence to distinguish right from wrong, good from bad and true from false. Such intelligence should be cultivated on the basis of wisdom and insight gleaned through the scripture and other sources of learning, like one's personal spiritual guide, often called *guru*.

One can derive knowledge from other sources as well, such as friends, elders, mentors or even books. I would say, pursuing *jnana* here includes being knowledgeable and keeping oneself open to learning.

Mahila: Sanatan, don't you think *jnana*, as you narrated, goes a long way in assuaging one's mind of the inclination to think that a Hindu conservative is a dogmatic with a closed mind imprisoned in a bunch of creeds?

Sanatan: Mahila, thanks for the good word on Hindu conservatism. People habitually carry a predilection to judge us negatively as inflexible. To tell the truth, some of us make it seem justified too. But, on the whole, Hindu conservatism is not as close-minded as people think. *Jnana*, as you point out, definitely should keep a conservative Hindu above the rigidity of mere doctrine, dogmas and creeds.

Vairagya or dispassion is hard to translate in English. Words like "detachment," "non-attachment" and "withdrawal" carry negative connotation indicating indifference or callousness. "Retreat" and "non-indulgence" are probably good alternatives. It is difficult to endow this idea with a positive glow in a cultural atmosphere that regards hedonistic consumption as a prime positive. The term *vairagya* indicates a level of maturity where we grow into the wisdom that lifts us above a life of sensual gratification and into that which has a promise of greater and deeper fulfillment, primarily spiritual fulfillment. Hope I am not upsetting Sanskriti . . .

Sanskriti: Yes, you are, Sanatan, but I will let you get away with that attack on enjoyments of positive life. After all, it is your day. Just kidding, Sanatan, go ahead. Any way, I must exercise self-control, because that is your next item!

Sanatan: True, Sanskriti. *Mano-nigraha*, the next item, means tempering the self or controlling the mind as opposed to letting it control us. Temperance is a very important aspect in the list. It indicates thoughtfulness and self-restraint, showing that one is considerate and not rash or hasty in demeanor. *Indriya-damana* means control of senses. Notice the overlap with the last item and also with items like *santosha, tapas* and *vairagya* at items numbered 7, 8 and 12. Oh, you may also think of it as overlapping with 4, called *brahmacharya*.

Sevak: To be fair to Goyandka, one may say, Sanatan, that these slight repetitions indicate a level of inter-connections and mutual coherence. They also reinforce each other in the mind of a seeker.

Sanatan: Precisely, Sevakji. Thank you for pointing this out. What may be overlap or repetition from an intellectual standpoint has a function to serve in actual spiritual pursuit and in providing integrated guidance in real life.

Darshana: True, Sanatan. That is why I refrained from dwelling on the apparent repetitions in the list. In a strictly academic situation I would not have exercised such a restraint.

Sanatan: Darshana, thanks for understanding. Item 15 is *titiksha* or endurance, yet another one that overlaps with *santosha* or contentment. But I hope that we see the subtle difference between the two.

Darshana: Ironically, an intellectual in an academic environment may defend a charge of overlap by making subtle distinctions! At times, we intellectuals unwittingly want to have it both ways!

Madhyama: We sure are glad not to be in the midst of stiff, hard-nosed academics!

Darshana: I am rather relaxed now, Madhyama. But I can recall times when I was less flexible. I think so was Sevakji, too.

Sevak: Maybe it's the age factor. Hope the greater ease now is a sign of maturity rather than loss of rigor.

Navin: Reform in whatever form or from whatever source is welcome!

Darshana, Sevak: Thanks, Navin!

Sanatan: On to the next item in the list, *shraddha* or faith. Hope it does not bother Anish too much.

Anish: Hmmm. Sanatan, I am still pondering your last item, which calls for endurance. So, I will endure it!

Sanatan: Thank you, Anish. I am happy the group is not attacking me savagely for being an old orthodox Hindu . . .

Sanskriti: Sanatan, at some point we may extract a price for our endurance!

Sanatan: In that case, I hope I will be able to practice the next item, called *kshama* or forgiveness! But just a moment more on *shraddha* or faith. Faith should not be necessarily in a personal God or Goddess alone. It should rather be in wisdom, which can come from any source around oneself. It can also be faith in oneself and one's ability to scale moral or spiritual mountains. Now, to forgiveness. Many orthodox find this hard to translate in their lives. But we must. It is a necessary virtue in the life of a conservative Hindu. Anger or stress resulting from not practicing forgiveness can negate a lot of spiritual and moral progress made in one's life.

The next item is *virata* or courage. No one is going to dispute it, so I will proceed further. Item 19 is *daya* or compassion. One can detect an easy overlap with *ahimsa* or non-violence. But the subtle difference is also apparent. *Ahimsa* relates more with conduct or overt behavior, while *daya* is a genuine feeling of empathy. *Daya* involves feeling other people's pain.

I will render *tejas* as "dignity" or "self-esteem," akin to self-confidence. It indicates a level of positive energy that flows freely and spontaneously. The spontaneity develops as you go further, working on the list. Goyandka interprets it as charisma that changes people who come under your influence.

We are half way down the list. Do we need to take a break for responses on what we have covered?

Madhyama: Sanatan, we'd rather have you finish the list in order to look at it as a whole.

Sanatan: Fine, Madhyama. Item 21 is *saralata* which means simplicity or being straightforward. Avoiding bombast, pomposity or needless or manipulative complexity is one of the virtues or qualities to be cultivated. It indicates sincerity coming from a pure heart. The next is *svartha-tyaga* or renouncing selfishness. Egotism or self-centricity, not to speak of narcissism, should be avoided, with the aim to looking for, understanding and appreciating the needs and desires of others with whom one is involved. *Amanitva* follows in the list. It means not insisting on honor, appreciation, recognition or consideration for oneself. Some people are arrogant and vain to the extent of being overly sensitive about their own importance. They are easily offended when they are bypassed or not considered, let alone ignored. This attitude should be

avoided. *Dambha-hinata*, the next item, means absence of hypocrisy or not being what one is not. This is probably a universally regarded virtue. It is like moral consistency, where a person does not pretend to be what he or she clearly is not. It is an egotist's overreach. Item 25 is *apaishunata*, which is absence of cruelty, It involves sensitivity toward others' feelings. In the least, one stays away from gossip.

Nishkapatata, the next item, means non-manipulativeness. This is clear and obvious. Item 27 is *vinaya*, which means humility along with its consequent etiquette and good manners. Confucius would call it *li*. Basically it involves an attitude where one respects others and allots sufficient space to them. Fitting in with community patterns without fussing about them is part of this *vinaya*. *Dhriti* means fortitude, implying an attitude where you do not waver or vacillate. In other words, you need to cultivate patience. Goyandka says it means not deviating from your path even in face of calamity. Item 29 is *seva* or service. It is service-mindedness or being ready to help others and be there for others when they need help. "Helpfulness" would be a good alternate translation of *seva*. One who has perfected this quality always remains absorbed in helping others. Item numbered 30 is *sat-sanga*. It is not just keeping good company in general. Particularly, it includes associating oneself with people whose presence is spiritually elevating. Being with one's guru is an obvious example. Cultivating uplifting company and spending quality time with them is a positive aspect. Obviously, avoiding company where time is ill spent, wasted or where your spiritual standing is compromised is the minimum that you are expected to work for in this respect.

Madhyama: Sanatan, hope our meetings here qualify as *sat-sanga*.

Sanatan: Goes without question, Madhyama. Item 31, *japa* means chanting God's name. Usually, we are expected to cultivate reminding ourselves of our chosen deity as often as possible throughout our waking life. Too, we can recite a *mantra* of our choice. It is best done mentally without overtly vocalizing it.

Anish: Sanatan, isn't it like having an inner *sat-sanga*? Would it be wrong if I regard it that way?

Sanatan: In fact, Anish, that seems to me to be a very good way of looking at it. Some time earlier we alluded to the verse in the *Bhagavad-gita* saying *uddhared atmanatmanam* or you should evevate yourself you're your self. Time with yourself that uplifts you should count as *sat-*

sanga, with the caveat that finding inspiration in a source beyond your self expands your identity and is spiritually nourishing for that reason.

The next in the list, *dhyana,* is usually translated as "meditation," which in this context means directing one-pointed thoughts to an inspirational object of your choice. Normally we choose to focus or concentrate on God, in this regard. Goyandka says *dhyana* means thinking about our chosen deity. I take it in a wider sense where we might as well direct our consciousness to any object that we find spiritually uplifting. This is called *vibhuti* in the tenth chapter of the *Bhagavad-gita*. Our thoughts can go around the object and list its qualities or even relations but we should bring our mind back to the object when we find that it digresses and begins to think about a different object. Patanjali, the author of *Yoga-sutra*, defines *dhyana* as *pratyayaikatanata*, which means very much the same thing, where we engage in having one thought after another that is predicated on the same subject.

Sevak: Very well put, Sanatan. As a good conservative, you show appropriate application of scriptural support.

Darshana: Indeed. You got the concept in its essence.

Sanatan: Thanks, Sevakji and Darshana. *Nirvairata*, next in the list, means not harboring hostility even toward those who regard you as their enemy. You yourself should have no enemies. This overlaps with *kshama*, at 17, with the difference that, while *kshama* or forgiveness is exercised after your presumed enemy hurts you, *nirvairata* is a standing attitude that goads you to harbor no feelings of enmity, hostility or revenge, to start with.

Madhyama: I see that the two work together, kind of, and I see no reason to quibble about the little overlap or repetition involved.

Sanatan: I am with you on that, Madhyama. Item 34, *nirbhayata*, means fearlessness. You want to stand your ground and take a fearless stand on all your important matters. You have no axe to grind, have no vested interest and are consequently without trepidation. *Samata* or equanimity means seeing everyone as equal to oneself. Lord Krishna even defines *yoga* as *samatva* in the Gita, which means the same thing. We should not be swayed by the various objects of the world and by the unequal value assigned to them by our and society's entrenched interests in them. Keeping our cool and our head above the waters is a way to eventually

proceeding on our spiritual path. Goyandka, like a typical conservative, says that under *samata* we should respect everyone equally even as we deal with them differently on account of their *varna* or class and *ashrama* or life-stage. Conservatives argue that the Hindu structure of classes and life-stages is just an arrangement to help society function harmoniously and gives us no license to offend, let alone hurt, others on account of their class or stage. When in real life we hurt or offend, we are not being a truly conservative.

Navin: I cannot quibble with that, Sanatan.

Sanatan: Navin, that isvery reassuring. Item numbered 36, *nirahankarata*, or having no pride is akin to *amanitva* or keeping away from vanity. In a subtle way, though, *nirahankarata* can be seen to involve renouncing even the idea that one does anything at all, thinking that, theistically, God is the real doer of everything and, non-theistically, that things happen to themselves and nobody is the real doer. It is a way of keeping our ego out of involvement in the material pursuits in the world and eventually overcoming the obstacles that the ego throws in our way on the spiritual path.

Sanskriti: You are doing well, Sanatan. Just four items to go!

Sanatan: Thanks, Sanskriti. Next one is numbered 37 and is called *maitri*, which translates as friendliness. Cultivating the idea of fellowship with everyone travelling with you on the earth would go a long way in your life's journey. This attitude makes for a deep sense of equality with all and respect for everyone's station in life. A famous saying in Sanskrit supports it: *udara-charitanam tu vasudhaiva kutumbakam*. It means "for the large-hearted, the entire earth is one family." *Dana* or charity is an obvious and very widely recognized virtue. Goyandka says it means giving with joy and respect, and without looking for a payback, to someone in need. The next item, *kartavya-parayanata* is devotion to duty. If everyone focuses on one's duties and performs them well, everyone else's rights would be preserved and protected automatically without much ballyhoo. The last item is *shanti,* which means peace, both inner and outer. I am not sure of the inner peace, for I won't make any tall claim that I have achieved true inner peace with and within myself. But I am ready to assume outer peace, namely, silence, because, folks, I am done!

Sevak: Thank you very much, Sanatan for a great job well done. But, even if you crave outer peace, we are not ready to let you in peace, yet! I am sure we will have questions and comments on your presentation as a whole, as soon as we take a deep breath and ponder the mighty forty of Goyandka and your interpretations of their meaning and significance.

Sanatan: Thanks, Sevakji. I am ready to break my newly assumed silence!

Sevak: Let me go in first with a few observations. Sanatan has clearly succeeded in manifesting the nobility of Hindu conservatism. He has clearly thrashed the prevalent stereotype about Hindu orthodoxy. The popularized image of narrow-minded and inflexible dogmatism hastily attributed to Hindu orthodoxy would lose credibility and justification, given Sanatan's interpretation of the forty qualities inherent in it. Especially, a quick glance at the list will show that its ingredients are very widely recognized as desirable, extolled across all the religions of the world. Another remarkable feature of the orthodoxy or, should I say conservatism, as presented by Sanatan is that there is no crippling conditionality to the list. Nowhere is it said that you have to believe in this or that particular divinity. Or that you will end up believing in this or that particular divinity. A life of the virtues as prescribed is not predicated on any tall promises of heaven, eternal life or whatever. Nor is there any threat of eternal hell, doom, apocalypse or like if one does not follow the list assiduously. The list is not based on a divinity or sourced in a prophet in order to gain an air of legitimacy or validity. On the other hand, it's a long list that challenges anyone yet is apparently not structured like a cage.

Darshana: Sevakji, I agree with you that the list advocates widely recognized qualities of character without conditions, threats, temptations or extravagant promises. As Sanatan said, Goyandka is content with saying that a Hindu is more of a Hindu as he or she evinces behavior showing more of these forty virtues. This indeed is remarkable.

Can I play a little of devil's advocate here, to juice things up? As Anish has pointed out, there is a presence of God in item 10 and possible oblique references to deity elsewhere. While this may not be a blemish from an open-ended theistic viewpoint, it does restrict it albeit in a minor way. It closes it from a wide variety of non-theistic viewpoints that have established themselves on the world stage of history. Many traditions of mysticism and paths of spirituality are predicated on non-theistic entities. Plato's Good, Parmenides' and Plotinus's One, Buddhist *shunya*, Jain

kaivalya, Lao Tzu's Dao come to mind as external or non-Hindu points of reference. Internally, Sankhya's *purusha* and Advaita Vedanta's *brahman* or *atman* by themselves do not involve theism of the familiar sort.

As we discussed earlier, advocates of non-theistic viewpoints are probably not interested in being counted among conservative Hindus. Still, leaving out a rather large group on the grounds of current and traditional practice of conservative Hindus can be avoided, particularly in light of Hinduism's theoretical openness with which we characterized Hinduism itself as we defined it. I would like to explore with Sanatan the possibility of regarding the list as open to wide choice of selections from among its items.

Sevak: Darshana, not a bad point, considering that you are trying to play a devil's advocate. My concern is that Sanatan has already given a lot of ground in not insisting on various aspects of what is commonly regarded as *Sanatana Dharma* or the eternal Hindu religion by the orthodox. I want to value and appreciate this gesture. Too, I would like to build on it rather than undermine it. As a constructive Hindu I want to desist from a hostile deconstruction for the reason that, once we set foot on a route of deconstruction, we may have to bid good-bye to any solid ground remaining for us to stand on. But I am willing to defer the matter to Sanatan.

Sanatan: My unconditional list of forty, sourced on Goyandka, provides strident concessions to moderates and reformists in the eyes of the orthodox. The latter would wonder what am I to gain on that account from the moderates and reformists, especially if they choose not to meet us somewhere half way on the ground. Would I have any standing left with my fellow conservatives if I continue to give in, selling out and giving away the store? I should not be concerned about myself in the matter personally. But even if I give out myself, that will not amount to winning over the orthodox. The latter feel that they have suffered a whole long history of misunderstanding, exploitation and even oppression at the hands of any and every one in the field of non-Hindu religions and that they have to stand their ground for their very survival.

Sanskriti: I think it is not only conservative Hinduism but Hinduism in general which has been like the underdog religion in the field of world religions, with anyone who has a tongue lashing out at it with impunity. We feel with Sanatan on that matter, because it is his community that has borne the brunt of the undeserved calumny from institutionally

entrenched interests among world religions waving aggressive self-supporting agenda. So, where do we go from here?

Darshana: I am afraid I should not press my theoretical point of devil's advocacy too far. There is reality outside the world of theory making whose call, too, must be heeded. Let me turn theory toward making the list philosophically sounder. I want to suggest exploring the purposes behind the list in terms of its goals. I see that Sanatan has desisted from linking the forty to particular end results. But can we make explicit where one would be headed if he or she pursues the qualities prescribed?

Sanatan: That is a good and fair question. Traditionally, these qualities should pertain to two of the four traditional *purusharthas* that are available to any Hindu. Let me recount them. The four are *dharma* or duty, *artha* or material resources, *kama* or physical desires and *moksha* or spiritual liberation. Out of these, *artha* and *kama* are this-worldly or lower goals, in light of which I would submit that it is the two higher goals, that is, *dharma* and *moksha* toward which the forty are addressed. Let me say then that they are the end results that an individual will be aiming at personally in cultivating the forty virtues.

Sanskriti: While it is traditional or orthodox to castigate normal desires as lower and raise other-worldly outcomes as higher, there is a case to be made that we should live a positive life while in this world. I am sure there is sufficient literature in the Hindu tradition supporting that viewpoint. I do not want to hear about Charvaka or Lokayata and their cheap and easy hedonistic materialism, for I am not talking about that. Neither Hindus nor any other group needs to be denied a decent standard of living. Nor does any group need to be curtailed in making any amount of progress they want to make in their lives with their own physical, intellectual or aesthetic efforts. Particularly, Hindus can make a good and great case for a positive, balanced and sweeping integration of all the four of their traditional values. This will contrast with the usual life-negating forces so prevalent and even dominant in many an asceticism in the world religions.

Sanatan: That's an eloquent case in its own right, Sanskriti. This-worldly and other-worldly, positive and negative, life-asserting and life-negating are pairs loaded with value judgments . . .

Sevak: It is possible to enter into an extended argument about the relative merit of the four *purusharthas* or values of life, a term literally translated as objects of human effort . . .

Darshana: You can say that again, Sevakji. My classes get locked in these arguments interminably!

Madhyama: Let me remind us that our present purpose is to get a clear and wide picture of Hinduism that fills in important details in the caricature definition in which we have encased Hinduism. The ultimate goal is to construct Hinduism for Today. Let us keep gathering perspectives on major details as we go on. But we do not have to get bogged down on niceties of details or subtleties of argument at this point. We need to continue the journey, noting the major details and their debatable aspects. Sanatan has presented orthodox or conservative Hinduism. Navin is going to present reform Hinduism. I invite you to join me when I attempt to moderate the two to arrive at what most Hindus can look to as a reasonable middle ground that all can aspire to. That will be the time to engage in viewing differing sides of the debates and their strengths.

Sevak: Thank you for leading us in the right direction, Madhyama. It seems we should let the subject of purpose or goal of the list stay at the pair called *dharma* and *moksha* in relation to the four *purusharthas* or values of life. So, we say that for a conservative Hindu, the forty qualities to be cultivated in actual life pertain to maximizing *dharma* and reaching *moksha*. But let me ask Sanatan if he would agree that *kama* and *artha*, pursued in a fair manner within the bounds of the forty virtues would not be denied by Hindu conservatism.

Sanatan: That's a good caveat, well articulated. Hindu conservatism is not all ascetic. It won't deny such a pursuit. It only denies the point where materialistic pursuit takes over and undermines the development of the forty qualities.

Sevak: Thank you, Sanatan. We have noted that the list is quite long and can stand some organizing. Are their suggestions here?

Darshana: Let me make an organizing suggestion. I noticed that some qualities in the list involve other people in one way or another while others in the list are relatively directed within oneself. Roughly speaking, we can divide the list into "basically self-related" and

"basically other-related." Looking at the matter more closely, I see some items that seem directed both ways. We can call them "largely both-related."

Madhyama: Splendid observation, Darshana. Which ones are which?

Darshana: Let us call the three subdivisions "sub-lists". Simplifying, we have three sub-lists: self-related, other-related and both-related. Incidentally, it seems the self-related list can be said to help one move toward *moksha* or spiritual freedom, which can be distinguished from the other-related list which is more clearly related to the goal of observing or inculcating *dharma* or responsibility to one's fellow beings. But *dharma* and *moksha* are not totally separate from each other, so do not hold me to this in an absolute sense.

Sevak: Quite insightful, Darshana. What do you think, Sanatan?

Sanatan: Makes good sense, Sevakji. Thanks, Darshana. Help us think further.

Darshana: Thanks, fellows. I'd like to populate the self-related sub-list with items numbered 4 through 16, and then 22, 28, 31, 32 and 36. This sub-list will have eighteen items. I'd fill the other-related sub-list with items numbered 1 through 3, 17 through 19, 23 through 27, 29, 30, 33 through 35, 37 and 38. Hey, this sub-list also has eighteen items. The remaining four items pertain to the both-related sub-list.

Sevak: How about actually seeing the three sub-lists with their contents, namely, brief English equivalents? That will make for a clear way for all to relate them in their mind.

Darshana: Fine, in that case let me represent the sub-lists as follows:

Self-related: chastity, non-possessiveness, purity, contentment, discipline, study, devotion, knowledge, dispassion, self-control, control over senses, endurance, faith, renouncing egocentricity, fortitude, chanting, meditation and non-doership.

Other-related: non-violence, truth, non-stealing, forgiveness, courage, compassion, absence of vanity, absence of hypocrisy, absence of insensitivity, non-manipulativeness, humility, helpfulness, good company, non-vindictiveness, fearlessness, equanimity, friendliness and charity.

Both-related: aura, simplicity, devotion to duty and peace.

Now you are free to quibble as you please!

Sanatan: I see the line of thought you are following, Darshana. I refrain from quibbling.

Madhyama: Looks like none of us wants to voice serious disagreement. We are, largely speaking, comfortable with the three sub-lists. Where do we go from here?

Sevak: There was a concern that the list is too large.

Navin: I am going to come up with a shorter list when I make my presentation.

Madhyama: Navin makes his presentation on reform Hinduism at the next session. Why don't we end this session now and wait for Navin's list? I am going to appoint myself to reconcile and condense the two lists, or rather the two views of Hinduism, from Sanatan and Navin. And that will be my presentation. So, I feel charged and ready for the next session.

Sevak: Good. You have endured a lengthy session. Thank you all for your patience. But most of all I want to thank Sanatan for an excellent presentation on conservative Hinduism. It was very helpful and useful to all of us. In addition, we have gained a new dimension on Hinduism through Sanatan's salient presentation. It has widened and deepened our understanding of Hinduism. I am echoing everyone's feeling here when I or, rather, we thank him. A great job, Sanatan.

Sanatan: You are welcome. I want to thank you all for listening to me intently and responding with very thoughtful comments. I truly appreciate it.

Sevak: This session has been long enough. Let us postpone its summary until the next session. We will see you all then. *Namas-te*, everyone!

All: *Namas-te*, Sevakji!

SESSION 6:

A REFORM HINDUISM

Sevak: *Om Tat Sat*, everybody.

All: *Om Tat Sat*, Sevakji.

Sevak: Greetings and a very warm welcome to the sixth session of the seminar on Hinduism for Today. We had a presentation on conservative Hinduism at the last session. Sanatan made a very able and salient presentation. Sanatan also led the discussion following the presentation. We took care of some previously determined agenda before Sanatan's presentation. I want to invite Madhyama to summarize the proceedings at our fifth session on Hinduism for Today. Following that, we will have Navin make his presentation on reform Hinduism and lead a discussion on the same. The agenda highlight for the next session will be Madhyama making a presentation on moderate Hinduism and leading a discussion on it. This will fulfill our larger agenda of using our definition of Hinduism as a foundation in order to build a relatively full and comprehensive structure of Hinduism suitable for today's context and needs.

Madhyama: Before I make a relatively brief summary of the last session's proceedings, I want to make a request to Sevakji and Darshana. It relates to my role at the next session.

Darshana: Go ahead, Madhyama.

Madhyama: I have an ambitious task, having to fulfill an assignment to erect an entire structure of Hinduism on the basis of the definition that we achieved after an exhaustive and exhausting discussion. Of course the structure construction is going to benefit from presentations by Sanatan and Navin. In fact it will be based on their reconciliation, which will be part of my moderate Hinduism. In order to do full justice to the task I need help from both Sevakji and Darshana. I would appreciate if I can consult with the two of you on religious and spiritual as well as conceptual and philosophical aspects of the structure. Not that I want to shirk my responsibility in constructing the structure. I want to avoid having a structure that needs obvious and unnecessary revisions, wasting our time in needless review activities.

Sevak: Madhyama's point is well taken. We will be happy to spend time and provide all the assistance. What do you say, Darshana?

Darshana: I agree whole-heartedly. Madhyama, consider it done.

Madhyama: Thank you, Sevakji and Darshana.

Sanatan: Looks like we are embarking on a solid path. Navin, you are involved in this too. How do you feel?

Navin: Great going! Can't wait to get to the end outcome.

Sevak: We seem to be well set. On to Madhyama's summary.

Madhyama: I feel good and relieved now. At the last session we were supposed to start off with taking stock of where we have been and reporting results of our field-testing the definition or rather working description of Hinduism. At Darshana's behest we decided to run the two connected items together.

On the field-test all of us reported positive results. Sevakji set for us the ideal of getting about eighty per cent favorable votes about our definition. We reported to have easily met that goal. As can be expected, we did get demurrers but, happily, they were not substantial and did not call for major revisions in the working description. The group voiced a strong feeling of fellowship that has resulted from our exchange so far. It was easy to see that the exchange, which has helped us learn so much about Hinduism and its varied aspects, has brought us very close together. Sharing our knowledge and freely expressing our opinions and discussing them has removed many a barrier among us. It is not usual that such a strong movement of coming close occurs among normally diverging views of Hinduism. I believe and think it is the group's feeling that much of this is due to the wise and friendly leadership of Sevakji and Darshana. Many thanks to them.

Darshana: Madhyama, it is very kind of you to mention us so favorably. The feeling is mutual. I have gathered quite a few idea gems from our exchange, not to speak of real closeness that I feel with the group as a result of our wonderful deliberations.

Sevak: I would definitely echo Darshana. The group has to be congratulated for a great way of presenting itself and working harmoniously toward our final goal of reaching a wide, deep and viable

form of Hinduism for Today. We are on the way. Keep it up. I am sure that much of this is due to the inherent positive, all-encompassing and universally friendly nature of Hinduism. Given a proper atmosphere such a result is pre-ordained. It feels great that we have made remarkable progress toward the goal and are within a striking distance of reaching it.

Sanskriti: When we actually reach it, we must abandon all prudishness and celebrate it?

Mahila: Sanskriti, we will put you in charge of leading the celebrations!

Sanskriti: I am ready to dance to the tune of Hinduism for Today! But let's get back to Madhyama's story of our last session.

Madhyama: We went into a discussion of a few and rather rare books on Hinduism that offered positive, promising, fair and friendly outlooks on Hinduism. This was fresh and inspiring, compared to the constant drumbeat of negative distortions from Western writers and their Westernized "Hindu" followers that we examined in the previous session. Linda Johnsen, David Frawley, Alain Danielou and Barbara Powell authored these judicious books. They are like oases in a big wide desert. Not that there is a dearth of pro-Hindu works in English. Much of it, however, seems to lack style and polish on the one hand and intellectual depth on the other. It also is mired in a didactic language addressed to nineteenth century audience. Most importantly, do we feel that it is generally not in tune with today's needs and context?

Anish: I agree, Madhyama. You've put it very well.

Madhyama: I see everybody nodding with Anish. Whatever the causes of this frustrating state of affairs, we must wish that it improves soon and substantially. Well, we then embarked on listening to Sanatan making his presentation on conservative Hinduism. He very graciously decided not to turn this opportunity into a tirade against modernity or a crusade for fundamentalist zealotry . . .

Sanatan: Madhyama, Madhyama, even conservative Hindus are Hindus first and are not easily given to such tirade or crusade unless, of course, they are mortally provoked . . .

Madhyama: Just kidding, Sanatan! I wanted to know how wide-awake you are at the moment!

Sanatan: Oh, it is impossible for me to lose attention in this dialog situation with its deeply engaging significance. Especially, when my own presentation is being summarized!

Madhyama: I am sure you are always attentive, Sanatan. Thanks for being a good sport!

Sanskriti: Anyone here losing attention?

All: No way!

Madhyama: Sanatan went ahead to base his narrative on a list of forty qualities as a hallmark of a Hindu, as presented by Jaydayal Goyandka, a prolific writer in Hindi with impeccable credentials as a conservative Hindu. With Goyandka, Sanatan said that the more a person imbibed these qualities, the more he or she was a true Hindu. Sanatan gave us the list, which we found to be large and intimidating, I guess, in more than one way.

Sanatan: What are the two ways, Madhyama?

Madhyama: Sanatan, first of all, the list is obviously outsized. Hard to remember, let alone keep track of. Next, it is pretty challenging. An average Hindu may be challenged to inculcate even as many as half a dozen virtues. But forty? One may faint!

Sanatan: Who thought being a conservative Hindu is easy?! But, Madhyama, to tell the truth, I am myself continuously overwhelmed by the list.

Madhyama: Any way, the list had a few items that challenged Anish to test his sensibilities about God. This ensued in a discussion about whether God is necessary or required in conservative Hinduism and, if so, on what grounds. We did not quite resolve this rather self-created issue, which proved to be a bit thorny. We ended up settling, or almost settling, with the notion that the Hindu tradition of orthodoxy harbors too deep a regard for God to give up theism altogether. On the other hand, we felt that a Hindu who does not care for the label "conservative

Hindu" should be free from having to endorse theistic spirituality or should be free to espouse a non-theistic spirituality.

Darshana: Matter well expressed, Madhyama, frankly and honestly, over-all. I won't quibble over fine points of precise articulation.

Madhyama: Thank you, Darshana. The next point was to address the list on semantic grounds. Sanatan provided narratives on the meaning of all the forty items in the list. While he occasionally referred to Goyandka's meanings, he mostly narrated his own meanings. This gave us all a very good handle on the values of conservative Hinduism. Especially, it impressed upon us the basic idea that a conservative Hindu is really concerned about making a person with a solid character rather than making a diehard believer who parrots a set of doctrines.

Sanatan: Madhyama, that's a good point. In fact I should have made this last point explicit. But you did it and did it quite well. Want me to call you a conservative Hindu?!

Madhyama: No, thanks! I will stay a moderate Hindu at least until I am done with my own presentation. We wanted to shorten and organize the list. We organized it into three sub-lists, which pertained to activities involving the self, those involving others and a few that involve both self and others. The division into these three categories was very helpful, at least to me, as I wanted to see the list reflecting some broad principles. As we wanted to proceed on shortening the list, Navin suggested that it may best be done in light of his own shorter list. So, there we are. Sevakji, is it a good time to hand this over to Navin?

Sevak: Indeed it is, Madhyama. You did a very good job summarizing the last session's proceedings. Navin, are you ready to tell us what a reform Hindu wants us to be?

Navin: That would be a very ambitious task. I will rather attempt a quite modest job, that of being quite selective from among a plethora of perspectives that reformists come from. The towering figure among the reformists is of course Mahatma Gandhi, the man who has influenced me the most in my own life and work. The form of Hinduism, which I am going to represent as the main structure of recommended reform, owes a great deal to my understanding of Gandhi's work.

I feel very odd, and I trust many of you would too, referring to the Mahatma as just Gandhi. I should at least say Gandhiji, instead, because

that is how he was called by most, with the honorific "ji" appended. But, since Sanatan did not insist on calling Goyandka as Goyandkaji, I decided to refer to the Mahatma as just Gandhi. But you all know that the man I am referring to does not bear any connections with the famous Gandhi family dynasty that actually ruled India in the second half of the twentieth century. After India's independence, Mahatma Gandhi could have been Prime Minister or president for life. He chose to remain just a private citizen, instead. That's the measure of a man. Power-grabbing politicians soon showed that they did not learn much from him, although they never tire paying lip service to him and his ideals.

Thinking of all this, I am having a hard time abiding by our dictum of avoiding politics . . .

Sevak: Navin, the sort of ban on politics was meant to scrupulously shun all talk about power-based group rivalry. I understand your concern, however. Sanatan did a great job avoiding politics in this sense and still managing to present a wonderfully generous version of conservative Hinduism. Feel free to involve yourself in group relations to the extent necessary to fully delineate the ethical aspects involved. I am sure Sanatan will not mind this relaxation on the restriction on politics.

Sanatan: Sevakji, really speaking, I want to thank you for the relaxation. As long as all of us feel comfortable staying within the ethical realm, we will do fine with going into the political forms and their merits as needed.

Mahila: I also feel it is about time we explore the essential social aspects of Hinduism.

Sanskriti: It makes sense, though, to restrict it to the ethical realm.

Mahila: Yes, but only as long as we are constructing general philosophy of Hinduism for Today. Once we have done it and are ready to embark upon filling in the social and individual concerns it involves, we should be free to go deeper into the actual life as we experience it.

Anish: Not just as we experience it; also as we should live it. That indeed is the idea behind Hinduism for Today. We need to provide general guideline on living a Hindu life.

Madhyama: True but, given the open-ended nature of Hinduism that we are converging on, there may be a number of ways in which Hindu life can be envisioned.

Darshana: Well put, Madhyama. A diverse pluralism is the sort of thing we are about to move toward, if not conclude.

Sevak: Diversity and pluralism have their measure of desirability. However, I'd hope that we would not endorse them for their own sake. I want to submit that equally desirable also are a shared root structure and overall coherence.

Darshana: Sevakji, I stand corrected. I agree some have recently emphasized diversity and pluralism in an exclusive fashion. That is a mistake. An open-ended shared foundation is necessary. As a philosopher I cannot also give up on coherence.

Madhyama: It is fascinating how our thinking works under two different metaphors. We sometimes refer our work of defining Hinduism as a foundation, under the metaphor of a house. At other times, we talk about roots, under the metaphor of a tree.

Sevak: Thank you for drawing attention to that, Madhyama. The tree metaphor helps us view the roots as organically nourishing the tree and making sense of numerous branches that are made possible. The house metaphor makes us to realize that a foundation with integrity can lead to a structure with great coherence.

Sanskriti: How about a house on a tree?! No, I take it back; I am not a Tarzan fan. And it won't work, either! Let's just continue using both metaphors.

Sevak: We surely do not want to fall for a monolithic and greatly impoverished Hinduism for Today. Also, we do not want a diffused and greatly confusing Hinduism for Today. We can exploit the propriety of both tree and house metaphors as we please as long as it helps us attain our goal of constructing a Hinduism for Today that is relatively complete, widely representative, open-ended, flexible, coherent, relevant, comprehensive and beneficent to Hindus as individuals and to the humanity at large.

Madhyama: Sounds ambitious and challenging. But also very exciting. Looks good. Can Navin go ahead?

Sevak: Sure.

Navin: Gandhi had insisted that all prospective members who wanted to live in his commune, called *ashram*, had to commit themselves to strictly abiding by eleven resolves and regard them as *maha-vratas* or great vows, never to be broken.

Sanskriti: I would have a hard time living there! What if somebody lapses and violates a resolve?

Navin: Gandhi had prayer meetings every morning and evening. A member could confess his or her transgression at a prayer meeting and ask the group how an atonement or restoration should be structured. One can suggest a remedy for oneself and see if the group approves it. I think Gandhi intervened if the group had a problem dealing with a particular confession.

Mahila: Very fascinating. What are the vows?

Sanatan: Just a query before you list them. The word *maha-vrata* suggests an influence from Patanjali's *Yoga-sutra*. Did Gandhi study it?

Navin: When Gandhi returned from South Africa, he spent some time in Rabindra Nath Tagore's Shanti Niketan. He studied the *Yoga-sutra* there.

Sanatan: As far as I recall Patanjali himself does not recommend all his restraints and observances as great vows or *maha-vratas*. Presumably, some can be practiced as *anu-vratas* or minor resolves. These would not be absolute dictators in one's life, in the way great vows would be. Whatever the degree of success in maintaining these resolves as great vows, they must call for a very puritanical life.

Navin: True, Sanatan. Gandhi himself was quite emphatic about the vows and insisted in their strict observance.

Anish: I am dying to know just what they are. What are the eleven vows?

Navin: Let me give you the words he used together with English equivalents. The first two are key concepts. Others are regarded as their derivatives. The first two are *satya* and *ahimsa*, usually translated as truth and nonviolence . . .

Sanatan: Didn't he use to say, "Truth is God" rather than "God is truth"?

Navin: Quite so. He said that some object to God but no one objects to truth . . .

Darshana: He did not live to see post-modernists deconstructing the idea of truth!

Sanskriti: Can you elaborate on that, Darshana?

Sevak: I would be afraid to start that digressing thread, Sanskriti and Darshana.

Sanskriti: I see that. Back to Navin.

Navin: According to Gandhi, "God is truth" can become an instrument of cavil in the hands of a religious fanatic who may use it to exclude, reject, hate and violate all whose concepts of God differ from his. But we can find practically all agreeing with the statement "Truth is God." In any case, he held truth very highly. Even higher than nonviolence. He said truth was the end and nonviolence was the means. Nonviolence was the only means to truth. But he did say that, worse comes to worst, nonviolence may be sacrificed but not truth. Now this may come as a surprise to those who do not know Gandhi enough and are stuck with his image as an apostle of nonviolence.

Anish: Count me as one of them, Anish. I am learning something important here. This is fascinating because it implies that materialism or even atheism can have a chance, though atheism being Godly can be self-contradictory.

Navin: Very interesting, Anish. I don't know how he would react to atheism being possibly true and, hence, Godly. He was never convinced by arguments for atheism, any way.

Anish: You theists are so stubborn!

Sanatan: I don't mind having even a reformist ganging up with me on an atheist!

Anish: I concede. This is fun. Go ahead, Navin, further with your list.

Navin: Rest of the vows follow after truth and nonviolence. They are *asteya* or non-stealing, *aparigraha* or non-hoarding, *brahma-charya* or celibacy, *svashray* or self-reliance, *asprishyata-virodh* or opposition of untouchability, *abhay* or fearlessness, *svadeshi* or patronizing community products, *svad-tyag* or control of palate and *sarva-dharma-sama-bhav* or equal respect for all faiths. I have read that there is a variant for *svad-tyag*, called *svarth-tyag* or non-selfishness. I prefer the former, because the latter is already implied in nonviolence, non-stealing and non-hoarding.

Madhyama: I see that the first five, beginning with truth, are on Sanatan's Goyandka list too. Others are Gandhi's own.

Sanatan: Those five that we share are also in Patanjali's *Yoga-sutra*. After all, we Hindus show a common thread, regardless of whether we are conservative or liberal.

Navin: Yes, and those five are some of the hardcore items in the list and Gandhi would never give them up. Particularly, truth and nonviolence. In any case, Gandhi's case is not made by reciting the list, though the recitation of the list was a part of prayer meetings in the *ashrams*. For, he practiced all the eleven of them scrupulously, diligently and vigorously.

Madhyama: That is why no one can beat him or even touch him. He is so formidable, compelling and intimidating.

Navin: No one's been more overwhelming to me.

Sevak: Very well put, Navin.

Navin: Thanks, Sevakji.

Madhyama: Navin, would you say that the last six items in the list, that is, those that are Gandhi's own, form the core of his reform mission?

Navin: Good question, Madhyama. Let's see. Sanatan runs a *guru-kul*, which is a traditional educational institution. It is sometimes called an *ashram* too. I am associated with a Gandhian *ashram*, which is an institution one of whose purposes it is to illustrate, implement and spread reform in the life of Hindu community or perhaps the larger community as a whole, of which Hindu community forms a huge part. The practice of the first five in the list of eleven tends to be the source of respect and recognition for my institution in the eyes of the Hindus in the community. Of the last six items, control of palate would hardly be called a part of Gandhi's reform movement. It is an element in the personal spiritual development of individuals all over Hinduism. Although it was controversial in the way Gandhi practiced it, the simplicity and discipline it involved in food is a point of admiration among the orthodox.

Sanatan: Especially, banning of onions, Navin.

Navin: Good point, Sanatan. Now, looking at the remaining five items, I would have a hard time thinking of any of them as not challenging the orthodox. What do you say to that, Sanatan?

Sanatan: Probably the diehard orthodox would have some concerns about all of them.

Navin: Self-reliance of an *ashram* was designed, among other things, to ensure fearlessness and make the commune invulnerable so that the commune can take a strong stand against corrupt or unjust practices of the outer Hindu community. So, self-reliance and fearlessness both in this context would cause concern among the orthodox.

Sanatan: That is true. Orthodox might also accuse a Gandhian *ashram* of isolationism on account of its self-reliance and fearlessness.

Mahila: What if the orthodox losing self-control cannot restrain part of its community and sees it turning to mob type violence ransacking the *ashram*?

Navin: That would test the *ashram*'s resolve of nonviolence, in the least.

Sanatan: I would condemn such violence as inconsistent with true conservative values. You know, nonviolence, compassion and

forgiveness are part of my list, discouraging such behavior. But things happen, have happened and such an onslaught cannot be ruled out.

Navin: Next item, opposition of untouchability is a major point of conflict with the orthodox.

Sanatan: Some orthodox Hindus offer a few points for consideration in this regard. A true conservative Hindu will not condone violent or cruel treatment of the untouchables. Indeed, much in Goyandka's list would be violated by such behavior. On the other hand, "untouchability" is not necessarily derogatory or insulting. Entire families of those who have died are held to be untouchable for a prescribed number of days for hygienic reasons. Menstruating women are "untouchable" by anyone . . .

Sanskriti: Remember your mothers having a four-day vacation each month from cooking chores?

Mahila: Yes, it was a welcome relief. But, Sanatan, wasn't that "untouchability" due to suspicions of impurity?

Sanatan: I don't know. At any rate, I am not sure. Because it is said that gods reside in the body of a menstruating woman, presumably because she is a potential bearer of another life at the moment. And, wonder of wonders, idols of gods are untouchable by the non-clergy. The latter are too impure to touch them. So, that's another example of untouchability.

Navin: Yes, it never occurred to me that gods in their idols are untouchable by the laity who are not even allowed to enter the inner chambers in the temple where the idols stand.

Sanatan: Hope you can see now that untouchability is not automatically intended to offend. The untouchables have traditionally been the ones who handle and dispose of the human refuse.

Mahila: But, Sanatan, even if not touching them while they are doing such "dirty" job can be understood, how is it to be understood when it is extended into a permanent ban on touching them on the part of the "higher caste" Hindus?

Sanatan: If they have physically cleaned themselves up, I cannot find a reason for the practice.

Sanskriti: If I were one of those untouchables, I don't know if I would be interested in getting touched by those who consider me unworthy of touching. I won't care less. I may not even let them touch me, if they become gracious enough to do that!

Navin: The point is in attitude of offensiveness. Gandhi was a strong egalitarian. He learned *samatva* from the Gita . . .

Sanatan: But, Navin, conservatives take that term to mean equal regard but not equal treatment. A mother may have equal regard for her husband and her toddler. But she cannot give them the exact same treatment. So, the conservatives have argued that social arrangement with regard to differing relationships appropriately involves differing treatments. For this reason, *samatva* in the Gita does not have to be interpreted as same equal treatment of all.

Navin: You do have a point there, Sanatan, to an extent. The argument from *vyavastha* or social arrangement can work in certain situations and circumstances as between, say, a mother, husband and toddler. But can it be extended to an arrangement where a group is practically discriminated against in a consistent and systematic way just as a result of the arrangement? In such a case the arrangement seems pre-ordained to result in discrimination. Offending or disadvantaging a group on account of their inherited social status on an adult-to-adult basis does not seem to meet the requirements of the situations such as the mother-husband-toddler type. Or, does it?

Sanatan: The diehard orthodox ultimately turn to the scriptures and say that the latter lay down the class or caste distinctions and that the wisdom of the sages who laid it down should not be questioned, for the sages cannot be thought of as harboring culpable discrimination. The sages were full of compassion for all living beings and would not discriminate on any account. Also, the orthodox would argue that they should not be charged with discrimination since they are not the ones who created the system or arrangement.

Navin: The question is whether the tradition, generated for whatever reasons and under whatever circumstances – even allowing for innocent intentions gone awry – is worth preserving at all costs, especially human costs, in the light of the harsh but unintended consequences.

Sanatan: I agree that purely on ethical grounds discrimination, exploitation and oppression have no place. And to that extent the diehard orthodox need to adjust their thinking and conduct. Especially the violent and intentionally offensive kind of behavior. But, Navin, how about the counter-violence and vengefulness on the part of the radical reformists? Would you support it in the name of historical justice or "just" reparation?

Navin: No, Sanatan, I won't be able to justify such reactionary behavior.

Sanatan: Then, we do have room to sit down together and do some work involving details of mutual adjustments.

Navin: Indeed, that would be great.

Madhyama: This is fascinating, so constructive and very gratifying. Just listening to the two of you, Navin and Sanatan, we see how so much potential can be realized.

Navin: Our work is cut out for us.

Sanatan: Yes, we should separately get down to work on that.

Navin: The next item in the list is supporting community products. This was listed as a direct result of Gandhi's opposition movement against the British rule of India. After independence it has taken less relevance. But it can be seen as a desirable ingredient of self-reliance. I have heard some people making an argument that globalization and increasing international interdependence should reverse the matters. So, in this view, support of community products should be replaced by that of global products. Reformists have to keep pace with changing world affairs!

Anish: Navin, I would like you to elaborate on the last item remaining on your Gandhi list: equal respect for all faiths.

Navin: There are several aspects to Gandhi's drive for equal respect for all religions. Gandhi had a strong spiritual, religious and philosophical conviction, formed early in his life, that all religions are just different ways leading to God. Building of this conviction began when as a child he nursed his ailing father and listened in on the frequent conversations his father had with visitors belonging to different faiths.

Sanskriti: Was it anything like our seminar here?!

Navin: I guess the meetings there took place sporadically and on one-on-one or may be at best on one-two basis. I doubt that there was an ongoing conference with systematic agenda to be worked out in an organized manner. We here are probably more elite. Karamchand, Gandhi's father, was sick for a long time. He also was politically active, having held a ministerial position with local regent. Hence, his visitors were presumably upper middle class members of the community, who were reasonably knowledgeable but not very erudite either. I must state in this context that Karamchand used to have interfaith conversations even when he was not sick. It was kind of a tradition in his home to have visitors with whom he engaged in religious dialog. Gandhi had the opportunity to listen in on many of these while nursing his father when the latter was bedridden.

Later, Gandhi began to study Hinduism as well as world religions in England on his own and in his own way. His focus was on getting the spiritual gist of every religion. His early premonition about different religions being different ways to the same divinity was confirmed and strengthened by these studies and other conversations with friends some of whom were clerics in South Africa. All this finally led to his mature and well-deepened conviction that all religions deserved equal respect because of their common threads of ethical contents and spiritual orientations. In deliberately marginalizing mere doctrinal differences he showed the typical Hindu approach.

Mahila: Navin, I have heard that, despite his deep-seated respect for all faiths, Gandhi disapproved of conversion from one religion to another.

Navin: Very true, Mahila. He believed that a person born and raised within a particular faith should focus on finding everything positive in that religion and practicing it with a view to reaching spiritual heights through the path-work salient to the native faith. He thought reacting negatively to one's native faith and seeking greener pastures elsewhere in a huff of emotion was a sign of spiritual immaturity and lack of courage in tackling the negatives in one's religious community.

Accordingly, he held that a person who failed to relate to his or her native faith and the community of his fellow adherents does not have the preparation to truly benefit from another faith that is alien to his upbringing. Like a typical Hindu he intuitively held that faith is like your spiritual skin, an essential part of your identity. You do not try to change it for cosmetic reasons. He also understood the concept of

svadharma in the Gita in this light, where Shri-Krishna clearly lays down that one should stick with one's own *dharma* or religion and not be tempted by another's.

Madhyama: But, Navin, it is doubtful that the word *dharma* in the Gita means a religion in the sense of a belief system as we know it today. My limited study of the Gita does not show a clear awareness of other belief systems.

Sanatan: In any case the orthodox have held that the word *dharma* in the Gita refers to the duties of one's social class or *varna*.

Navin: Gandhi probably won't deny what both of you are saying. Still, as I understand him, he would also insist that it won't be inappropriate to regard the Gita as involving an adherence to one's native belief system. He might say that, if Shri-Krishna were to speak in the context of today's world faiths, he would say that no one needs to abandon one's native faith precipitously. Especially, in order to embrace another religion in a fit of emotional reaction, which one may be prompted to do as a result of promises made by the other faith. In other words, faith-shopping in any form is immature and unwise. Faith should be one's identity and not a commodity on sale.

In his view, therefore, since Hinduism to a Hindu is a matter of deep identity, any attempt by another faith to convert him or her to that faith is an act of bad faith on the part of the converting missionary religion. This is one reason he always remained a strong opponent of missionary religions that seek converting people of other faiths. In this light, facile and convenient arguments from a so-called freedom of religion would appear to be infected by a pernicious ignorance of the nature of spirituality, not to speak of the violent resistance put up against faiths that try to convert natives in the communities of the same missionary religions.

Sanskriti: I dare say that perniciousness of ignorance that Navin imputes here is twofold in nature. For one thing, the missionaries who profess to proslytize evince colossal ignorance of the native's religion and spirituality. They have hardly, if ever, studied it in any depth, let alone try to understand it from its own viewpoint. So, they come with dark yellow glasses in the first place. Secondly, the missionaries reduce native faith to a set of dogmas, raising a straw man, and compare it with their set. Their mind bred by mere doctrines has little sense of the deep,

personal spiritual aspects of even their own faith, let alone the native's faith they seek to change.

Madhyama: Eloquence is rarely joined by clarity. But, Sanskriti, you said it with both eloquence and clarity.

Sanskriti: Thanks, Madhyama. But I am sorry for the interruption.

Anish: Going back to Navin's explanation of Gandhi's respect for all faiths, I find that a very interesting viewpoint. I want to ponder it more. It is refreshing that Gandhi's view is not an attempt to propagate a particular belief system. Not even Hinduism. In fact, his argument is independent of all particular belief systems. It comes from his view of spirituality, which he seems to be finding as a core component of every world faith. The only problem I have with it is that many faiths as actually practiced have moved away from this core into a structure of dogmatic beliefs.

Navin: I agree, Anish. He won't have much concern with the details of religion as a belief system. He would look upon it with a benign neglect as long as it does not affect society in a damaging way. He did think, though, that a belief in heaven and hell, for example, is an attempt to induce belief by temptation and threat and thus not spiritually or ethically authentic. Of course, if heaven and hell are offered as just deserts of appropriate individual actions, they are not as vulnerable as when they are dished out as reward for belief and punishment for disbelief.

Anish: Three cheers to him! I certainly do not want to carry myself as a fanatic atheist setting up a rival religion of atheism. For, that would amount to playing into the hands of the institution of dogmatic religions.

Sanatan: I won't be that negative on religions as an institution. They are not wholly bad. Yes, I would certainly recognize their excesses and injustices as such. But I do not want to deprive myself by blocking off all the positives they contain.

Anish: We come to religion from different experiences. Being the youngest in this group makes me overstate my case at times. But isn't overstatement the spice of intellect?

Darshana: You are on to something there, Anish. I will think about that.

Navin: Some of Gandhi's associates were atheistic and agnostic. He got along with them quite well as long as they did not make their unbelief into a fanatic counter to traditional religions. As he disagreed with and sought to reform the zealous and overblown aspects of Hinduism that led to unfair practices, he feared zealous atheism would fall in the same line. Any way, he did endear himself to many an atheist.

Anish: No wonder he endeared himself to almost everyone that came in close touch with him. He lived so authentically.

Navin: You can say that again, Anish. I hope all this is not boring to Sevakji and Darshana. They probably know all I am saying about Gandhi.

Sevak: I am glad to remain relatively silent, observing that the group is absorbing Navin's perspective with deep interest.

Darshana: I will step in when we walk into a philosophical controversy. The discussion is doing well in its own right.

Navix: That makes me feel better.

Sanatan: Navin, you said that Gandhi sought to reform excesses of Hinduism. Orthodox Hindus noticed that pointedly. They were annoyed at Gandhi calling himself a *sanatani*, that is, a conservative Hindu. So, I have two questions that I hope you won't mind answering at this point. Why did Gandhi regard himself as a *sanatani* and how did he try to reform religions other than Hinduism?

Navin: Sanatan, these are important questions and I have heard them before. Gandhi himself explained the term *sanatana dharma* as meaning, to him, eternal spiritual truth, found in Hinduism. This truth is always relevant, meaningful, useful and effective for every human being anywhere. It transcends history by being timeless. The literal meaning of *sanatana dharma* is "eternal religion" and you have used it for yourself as is the convention of conservative Hindus. Gandhi used it in the sense that it indicated to him the principles that he found applicable in actual life regardless of time, history and circumstances. He held he was a *sanatani* because he not only believed the principles but also practiced them. He said that truth and nonviolence, the two basic principles that were all-important to him, always worked. He claimed

that he found them in Hinduism. Gandhi recommended that they should be practiced without any conditions, restrictions or exceptions.

Sanatan: Quite an innovative use of the term, Navin. Strong orthodox Hindus take an exception to this use as odd in light of Gandhi's opposition of many of their beliefs and practices. You can say that that is their problem. But they were offended and thought Gandhi appropriated their belief and faith rather disingenuously. It is hard to find fault with the use on moral or spiritual grounds. Hindus strong in orthodoxy feel Gandhi could have found another term. Sevakji, is there a precedent for such use in the history of religions?

Sevak: Several precedents come to mind. But they are all unfriendly to the orthodox. Reformists have often used orthodox labels in response to the orthodox attacks on their positions. Jesus said that he did not come to oppose the law but rather to fulfill it. Protestants claimed to be going back to what they regarded as the original Christianity as against Catholicism they took an exception to. Mahayana Buddhists claimed to hold the original and "higher" teaching of the Buddha himself in their response to the orthodox Thera-vadins. Confucius said he was only editing the original Dao rather than promulgating a new one.

Darshana: Even the supposedly secular Socrates, when charged with introducing strange gods in Athens, said that he was rather an orthodox believer misunderstood by the orthodox.

Sevak: Insightful, Darshana. In Hinduism, the term *sanatana dharma*, used by the orthodox for themselves, stood prominently, in their mind, for what was important for many of them, namely, the system of social classes called the *varnas* or sometimes also *jati* or the caste system. Gandhi opposed the hierarchical nature of the practice of *jati* as it was derived from the hierarchical structure of the *varnas*, which came to be practiced in pre-modern Hinduism. There we are! Hope this is useful.

Madhyama: Seems we are looking at an age-old phenomenon repeating in the disagreement between Sanatan and Navin. It is going to be my challenge to moderate this conflict.

Sevak: We have to be realistic and not hope to resolve all issues and especially those that have defied resolution through centuries or even millennia. But we definitely should try.

Mahila: Then, again, the best that we come up with will be a general philosophy with a coherent conceptual structure. It will present another challenge to social workers like me. Persuading people of its desirability, instilling it in their mind and translating it in social reality will not be easy either.

Sanskriti: You said it, Mahila.

Madhyama: Our work is cut out for us in either case, conceptual or practical.

Anish: I am not despairing. But I am younger than you folks.

Sevak: Let us resolve to do the best we can with our self-appointed job. We need to keep reminding ourselves of this from time to time.

All: Indeed!

Madhyama: Back to Navin.

Sanatan: This was about my first question. I had a second question, that about Gandhi's work on reforming other religions.

Navin: Sanatan, Gandhi identified himself as a Hindu and held that his duty to clean up his own house had precedence. He thought that people identifying themselves with other religions should attend to cleaning up their houses as they saw fit. Gandhi did not think he was the person to judge and tell others what reforms they needed to implement in their religions. Every religion, in his opinion, has its conscience-bound duty of self-purification. People belonging to other religions do not have to be so presumptuous as to suggest changes in it unless really pressed to do that.

Sanatan: It is not likely that they would be pressed really hard.

Navin: Quite so.

Mahila: Navin, since the class structure and the caste system are important to both you and Sanatan in your different ways, I would like to know your own thoughts and feelings about them and see what Sanatan has to say on the matter. I faintly remember we talked about this in the very first session we had, but maybe this is a good time to deal with it in

the present context. As a social worker I need to build a good perspective on the issue.

Navin: Yes, Mahila. The issue about class and caste is likely to arise in the life of every Hindu, conservative or reformist. I am myself trying to find my own viewpoint on the matter. I don't think I am settled in my mind on it completely.

Sanatan: Good you have an open mind on it, Navin!

Navin: Sanatan, not open enough for large orthodox ideas!

Madhyama: It will be interesting to see how open or closed our minds will be when our seminar gets to a close.

Sanskriti: My guess is they all will be broader than where they started but they won't all be filled with the exact same Hindu stuff.

Darshana: Yes, I doubt that we will erase all individuality from our minds.

Sevak: Yes, I have a feeling that we will have come closer to each other at the end. And, hopefully, toward a fairly though not completely common view of Hinduism.

Sanatan: My conservative mind will take heart from seeing what we will have preserved of the ancient wisdom of the Hindu sages.

Navin: And mine from seeing what new good ideas we will have incorporated in our views of Hinduism.

Mahila: Navin, for now let's go back to my query about class structure and caste system.

Navin: Sure, Mahila. Let me first state Gandhi's view about it as I understand it. As an egalitarian and a sort of anarchist, Gandhi opposed inequality and hierarchy he saw in the Hindu classes and castes. He worked tirelessly and nonviolently to reform any practices that he found to be discriminatory or exploitative. For instance, his work for equality of women in the Hindu society is exemplary. On this matter, he notably opposed the custom of dowry to be paid by bride's parents. As we know he singled out the practice of untouchability toward the outcastes as

particularly unconscionable. Hence, we see opposition to untouchability as an item included in the eleven vows to be taken by all entrants to the communes that were based on his principles.

Yet, Gandhi acquiesced in the class structure where the Hindu society is divided into four broad classes: educators/priests, administrators/rulers, farmers/merchants and artisans/laborers. Since only a very rare individual, if really any, would want to be fully self-reliant and fulfill all these functions by oneself, most would like to adopt and specialize in one function and outsource the functions that one cannot or would not fulfill. The four classes represent all the four functions that every society needs to have performed. So, per the famous *Purusha* hymn of the *Rig-veda*, these functions would represent the head, eyes, thighs and feet of the body politic, so to say. All organs are essential and none should be held to be preferential or privileged.

We can see why Gandhi qualified his acquiescence into the class structure with a few conditions. First, as we already saw, no class is to be regarded as higher or lower than any other class. All classes are to have exactly equal status in the society and this is to be insured by equal pay for each class. Hereditary nature of the classes is not to be impugned because it is natural for a child to learn and to want to perform the craft of the parent and hereditary transfer of jobs would ensure a steady supply of all primary functions. The steady supply was a key factor in the millennia-long stability of village as a basic unit of the Indian society. This is one reason why and how Muslims and even Christians to some extent fitted themselves rather harmoniously in the broad class structure. They evolved their own caste structures, so to say.

Secondly, even while hereditary classes get the Gandhian nod, no function is to be forced upon anyone who is unwilling to accept it. If a function goes unclaimed, it has to be equally shared among all others by rotation. In some of the Gandhian *ashrams* certain days of the week are earmarked when normal daily functions are rotated in order to relieve the tedium for everyone having to do the same thing every day. For example, if women are cooking on a daily basis, men will do the cooking on particular days to relieve women of the monotony.

Sanskriti: God save women from men's cooking on those days!

Navin: Sanskriti, if you women want to have it both ways, you will have to instill good cooking in your men! In an *ashram* situation one can obviously experiment with greater latitude. Say, at the beginning of the *ashram* life, the functions can be distributed among the members of the commune on a maximally free and voluntary basis. This cannot obtain

in the larger outlying society, which is too complex to handle such radical democracy. But here too no class function should be forced upon any individual.

Hey, this was a rather lengthy speech, except for an interjection by Sanskriti. Thanks for listening.

Mahila: Navin, this is clear and stimulates thinking, cutting through a lot of stereotyping on the subject that goes around to confuse the mind. This is Gandhi's view of the matter as you understand it. Do you endorse it fully or with some changes?

Navin: Regulation of group and individual behavior in *ashram* situation has to be distinguished from that in the outlying society in which nearly all of us live . . .

Sanskriti: Navin, you are the only one here living in an *ashram*. Oh, yes, Sanatan should also be counted, but he lives in a more traditional *ashram*, actually a *guru-kul*. Right, Sanatan?

Sanatan: Yes, I live in a conservative commune and Navin lives in a reform commune. Nevertheless, we live in communes of a sort. Navin's *ashram*, I should concede, is more self-reliant and mine is largely dependent on outside donations, including school fees. Navin's speech gave me a good indication of how Gandhian *ashrams* survived in adverse circumstances. Traditional *ashrams* like mine, though, have greater endurance.

Navin: I must concede that, Sanatan. Gandhian *ashrams* have been facing much headwind especially in the last few decades, while traditional *ashrams* have experienced a resurgence of sorts.

Sanatan: Not that we remain completely traditional. We have changed and adjusted with the times, even as we resist it. We just cannot live up to the ancient scriptural standards in this day and age.

Navin: Sanatan, it is ironic the orthodox have adapted enough to survive while the reformists struggle to remain extant. Not all reformists face the same dire situation as the Gandhian *ashrams*, though.

Sanskriti: I know, Navin. What is it about Gandhian *ashrams* that makes them more vulnerable?

Navin: In fact I have given this some thinking. I had to, of course, being in charge of the accounting for my commune. The financial situation stares and screams at me every day when I close the books of accounts. I know we are engaged in good work and we do not expect to make big profits. We just want to break even, being a non-profit organization. Following Gandhi's principle of *aparigraha* or non-aggrandizement and *svashray* or self-reliance, we persevere to make the two ends meet. Sanskriti, the reason why we are relatively more vulnerable, I have come to think, is that we, like Gandhi, remain uncompromising. We hardly, if ever, accede to the demands of times and make appropriate changes as necessary. The unbreakability of the eleven Gandhian vows, keeps us fettered.

Sanatan: Navin, it is interesting that we orthodox have incorporated greater accommodation while the reformist Gandhians remain steadfastly committed to their ideals. It is even more intriguing when I think back on the nature of *sanatana dharma* and peruse the *Dharma-shastras* or the Hindu law books at times. I find myself justified or at least reinforced in the changes orthodox institutions have made generally. Of course, some have given in to corruption and that I will never condone. But the reinforcement I get is due to the *smritis* or *dharma-shastras* themselves. The latter have clearly laid down that one should adjust the principles on account of *desha, kala* and *apatti* or time, place and circumstance. Besides, the principles can be practiced as *maha-vratas* or in absolute terms or as *anu-vratas* or with appropriate qualifications. In the great epic *Maha-bharata,* for example, Bhishma Pitamaha states that *satya* or truth is very difficult to ascertain or identify at times because circumstances can make a truth into an untruth and an untruth into a truth. Of course, this does not give us a license to break an adopted rule or principle at will or for a trivial purpose. There is a fine line and we must strike a delicate balance. But to my mind the scriptural intention is quite clear. I do not see Hindu scriptures intended for putting people in black boxes where they are blinded by the dazzle of the principles so much that they are unable to discharge the function they have set out to discharge.

Navin: Sanatan, Gandhi was a study in contrasts. In his dealings during *satyagraha* movements where large political dramas were involved, Gandhi almost habitually let go of his side's demands and conceded the opponent's demands rather easily. Or at least this is what seemed to be the case to many an observer. On the other hand, in his dealings within his *ashram*, he always seemed to be rigidly and strictly applying all

principles. Let me cite a famous incident. He was away from his *ashram* once, when Kastur-ba, his wife, accepted on behalf of the *ashram* a quarter of a rupee from a visitor. When Gandhi returned and was told about this, he was furious against this violation of the *ashram* principle and took Ba to the task. He not only forced her to return the trivial amount; he humiliated her publicly by writing an article about it in his newsmagazine. He received public acclaim for his impartial dealing with a family member's behavior. But when I read about it, I could not but harbor a feeling of doubt about Gandhi's tendency of making a molecule into a mountain. In his defense, though, it must be said that he was very apprehensive that if an exception is made to a rule it opens things up and would eventually end up undermining the principle itself at some point. So, for him all little or big possible exceptions should be nipped in the bud.

Sanatan: In fact I admire Gandhi's persistent consistency and overwhelming absence of hypocrisy as virtuous traits for a sage to exhibit. I also see the point in not allowing any excuse to bypass a rule. Nevertheless, I think the Hindu sages did the right thing in teaching that adjustments have to be made in view of time, place and circumstance.

Navin: I am beginning to see the point in this wisdom of the sages. I am going to think more on this.

Madhyama: What a fascinating exchange of viewpoints including a kind of reversal of the roles of conservatism and reformism! But, I guess, such is life and we must take account of actualities of life. So wise of the sages to make room for adjustment and reform! Makes me feel good in my frequent role of moderator or arbitrator.

Darshana: Not only that, Madhyama. You can also use this meta-principle of adjustment in formulating your version of moderate Hinduism when you seek to reconcile the viewpoints of Sanatan and Navin.

Madhyama: Thanks, Darshana. For sure.

Anish: I see more clearly now the wisdom of Sevakji's idea of constructing a "Hinduism for Today". We are only following the ideas of the sages in seeking to reconstruct Hinduism to fit the new times, places and circumstances.

Darshana: So long as we remain thoughtful and considerate and do not use the meta-principle of adjustment lightly to flout the basic principles that define Hinduism.

Sevak: Yes, we must reconstruct Hinduism primarily in the footsteps of the Hindu sages. It is a great solace that we can do this, which has the potential of bringing both the conservative and the reform sides closer to each other.

Navin: I already feel closer to Sanatan.

Sanatan: And I have learnt things that find me closer to Navin.

Mahila: I want to bring Navin back to my question as to whether he fully endorses Gandhi's view of class structure that he, Navin, articulated.

Navin: I confess I find Gandhi's view on class structure quite attractive. But I also concede I see no easy way of seeing it actualized in near future. Major attraction is the egalitarian aspect whereby all classes are paid equally. Major obstacle is implementation. Take for example, the notion of equal pay for all types of work. You can visualize psychological, individual, economic and even political factors messing it up very easily. Even if you get to legislate it, which itself is a big if, you can find it very difficult to maintain. If we seek to use our new-found principle of adjustment, there are just too many variables to keep the society harmonious. A constant strife among various groups in the society without a clear, simple and quantifiable set of principles to arbitrate the differences would keep the ideal or dream far from a *fait accompli*.

Mahila: Which is where we are any way. Aren't we?

Sanskriti: At least people now have freedom to work for the class of their choice and even move to another class? Relative freedom any way, depending on where they happen to live.

Anish: Look at it the other way. Planned economy and legislation that accompanies it reduce inequalities too. Again, yes, depending on where you happen to live.

Darshana: Isn't it too much to expect religion to accomplish social goals?

Sevak: We are exploring a rough and tough terrain here. Maybe at least for now we should be content to make a statement of our ideals and let social leaders take it up from there. Yes, we will have the task of convincing them of the ideals we arrive at. For, they might be interested in pursuing some other ideals. Either way, implementation is something that will have to be outsourced, right?

Madhyama: Yes, Sevakji, I do not see us developing the resources to work on implementation with even a modest and illustrative success. Mahila and probably Sanskriti are the only ones here that we can send out in the society to translate egalitarian ideals.

Sanskriti: But are we taking egalitarian ideals for granted?

Darshana: That question will take us into deep philosophical waters. Caution! Waters are turbulent there.

Anish: Socialism against free enterprise? Can Hinduism, conservative or reformist, show an alternative or, at least, point to a fresh, new, different outlook? Sanatan, Navin?

Sanatan: If we keep the caste system out of this for now, the class structure of the conservative vision has always envisaged some socio-economic inequalities but has neutralized them under a religious-spiritual umbrella, so to say. It worked for a long time. But it does take most, if not all, members of the society to be in a participatory and contributive mode with a strong sense of belonging to the whole, to the community. We now have every group looking at another and screaming about even minor or reasonably earned benefit excesses of the others. The sense of interdependent and interactive belonging is no more than a nostalgia.

Navin: To my own surprise my feelings are close to Sanatan's in this matter. Gandhi conceded that some entrepreneurs, for example, will make more than many others in the society. In light of this, he proposed his celebrated principle of trusteeship. According to this principle, a successful entrepreneur will voluntarily choose to live with the same standard of living as others in the community and will use the excess, the Marxist surplus, for the good of the community as a whole rather than for oneself. This would make "progressive" taxation obsolete and unnecessary. Education is the key to have such far-out ideal to be realized. But with the rampant individualism borrowed from the West and self-serving politicians always ready to inflame every seeming group

injustice, we have the weeds of disharmony growing wildly. With everyone in a rush to make and consume more than everyone else, we have sown the seeds of the destruction of whatever little social harmony we had left.

Anish: I can see Sanatan chiming in here with the way ancient *gurukuls,* led by the sages, exemplified clear, equal and simple living for all groups and classes in the society. Some of my humanist, liberal and Marxist friends would counter in the following way. Egalitarianism, if not socialism, has a ring of truth higher than that of licentious capitalism. According to them, the times when inequalities and injustices were tolerated are past. We can talk about and valorize the attitude of sacrifice, participation, contribution, belonging and the like. We can also plead for a reformed education system to create it or, depending on your history, to revive it. I agree there are political opportunists too ready to take advantage of the situation, times and sensitivity of those involved. I will grant that the bias from the left may be as good or bad as bias from the right. One question I want to put forward any way is how do we decide if it is desirable, assuming that it is possible, to set the clock back. In this day and age, people are conscious of their rights and plights. However well-meaning a didactic dish we serve them that echoes the virtues of sacrifice and tolerance in the name of God, karma or the like, it may not appear appetizing or nutritious to the modern-day society, or even to the post-modern society, as a whole.

Mahila: I see the same realities of sensitive consciousness around, especially in the situation of women. For good or bad, consciousness of group rights has achieved a high pitch and it cannot be seen to be easily toned down. To my more energized feminist friends sacrifice, compromise, social harmony and the like are apt to appear as rhetoric for the status quo which is regarded as decadent sexism. Or, at least, this is how victims will view the matter. I do not hold brief for the ideological innocence of all victims where, if you can sell your victimhood, you are free and clear to demand anything with impunity. Still, if concept of sacrifice is to have any currency, it will have to be shared very equitably and in a prominent way by the privileged classes. Is this too much to ask from a Hinduism for Today? Or, can we see a vision that will take care of these concerns in a novel way? If a suitably adjusted Hinduism can address this, it would make a great contribution.

Sanskriti: All this is fair and good. But as we know much of it issues from a leftist bias. If I may, I'd like to balance it with a view from the

right. The political demise of communism and much of Marxism has left the leftist ideology in tatters. Academics, as I understand them, are still in charge of much of education with their leftist bias. The economic forces of globalization are a reality too and the global hunger for growth or, at least, the universal desire not to be left behind in the progressive movement for a decent standard of living for everyone, demands freedom of enterprise rather than incentive killers designed in the twentieth century. I want an adjusted Hinduism to look forward to the twenty-first century and beyond with a realistic eye and not just an idealistic dream. I do not want to abdicate my responsibility to the society. I admit I do not go to the extent of working strictly in accord with Gandhi's principle of trusteeship. I spend and consume but I submit that it does go some way to support the economy. I am also deeply engaged in substantial philanthropy that is quite beneficial to a number of disadvantaged segments of society. I and my husband head many charitable institutions and are enlightened enough to know and feel the plight of those who are less fortunate. We see the latter daily and are committed to help them the best we can. Our wealth is well-earned and we behave responsibly. We hire a lot of talented people in our enterprises and we share our profits with them in a reasonably fair manner. I have volunteered to spread joy and bliss with my work in art and culture, through dance and charitable social events. I agree that not all successful entrepreneurs take such a contributive approach. My *laissez faire* friends would be much more vocal on capitalism than what I've said. The society should aim at creating opportunities to raise all who are willing to work for success. I'd be wary of accommodating egalitarianism beyond this point. For, distributing income and assets toward a mechanical equality of all, paying little heed to what anyone produces, is an old recipe for unduly disincentivizing those who have played by the rules and have eminently made it for themselves and have helped build the economy by providing jobs and capital.

Darshana: I was afraid of big turbulence. We managed the dialog with remarkable, I'd even say, exemplary civility. I am pleased to be wrong! Even in my academic encounters, where cool heads are supposed to prevail, I have seen tempers flying and people leaving committee and faculty meetings with bitter sarcasms spewed all around. Having seen intellectuals on fire on ideological fuel, I underestimated our Hindu tolerance of and respect for difference. You people deserve congratulations! You have it what it takes to do real constructive work.

Sevak: So, there is hope for a good, sound, healthy Hinduism for Today!

Madhyama: I am not going to take anything for granted. In my work in conflict resolution I have seen many a seemingly peaceful mind explode into conflict aggravation. We are human after all and I won't be surprised to see us explode some day. All of us mean well; or at least that's how I see all here. Also, we do have our differences. They are not immune from surfacing some day. But we can work with them and even in spite of them. We got to be understanding of each other and creative in handling situations. And of course there has to be a give and a take. Finally, we have to work hard at it to reach our goals. Our present goal is to achieve an appropriate form of Hinduism for Today. Let us stay on that as focus. We are doing well. Let's accept Darshana's congratulations and go on with a renewed commitment to our goal of formulating a solid Hinduism for Today.

I don't mean to play down the importance of the Hindu spirit that is helping us all along. Tolerance of and respect for difference. Darshana put it very well. I see its source explicitly in the definition of Hinduism we reached. It says a Hindu is one that knows there are many ways of speaking of the ultimate and many ways to reach it. Almost all other religious alternatives to Hinduism are exclusivist and would fight rather than admit even modest merits for other religions. They would have expected us to have fallen apart long ago and would regard our discursive harmony as dull and artificial. Strife seems so "natural" to them that they expect it as a norm. They are the ones who need to learn from us or rather from Hinduism. But they may not have time to look up here from their endemic bickering with everyone that differs from them on beliefs. We don't want to be like them. If they keep offering us the entertainment of angry dialogs . . .

Anish: Madhyama, you are assuming that they even enter into a real dialog with everyone on a level field.

Madhyama: Anish, given their dogmatic exclusivism, it would be a miracle to see them huddle peacefully and embark on a constructive dialog to achieve anything beyond empty platitudes.

Sevak: Madhyama, that should remind us. We here should not be content with empty platitudes. Our Hinduism for Today should be optimally articulate and sufficiently elaborate. Simplicity for its own sake can derail us from that objective. At the same time, we need to avoid fluff and trim fat.

Darshana: Just as we do not run from necessary complexity, I want to see us not descend into murky thinking. We need to remain precise and clear in our thinking. At least, as much as the subject matter allows.

Madhyama: We are glad you are with us, Darshana, to keep us on that track.

Sanatan: Before we fly too far on a tangent, I want to bring us back to the point of our challenge. The challenging question that emerged was whether Hinduism, conservative or reformist, could offer something viable in face of today's ideological struggles. I do not see any form of Hinduism relishing or even allowing a perpetual strife in society on an ideological basis. I see Hinduism based on the notion that all the four top values of life should be available to all its members with optimal harmony in the society. This vision, however, has to come to terms with two forces. One, the increased consciousness of rights and plights on the part of all groups everywhere. Two, the presence of non-Hindu views and ways of life in the midst of and around Hindu social fold. Navin, you are the man of today. How do you see the Hindu possibilities on this?

Navin: The challenge is not insignificant, Sanatan. Gandhi's eleven resolutions for *ashram* life still seem relevant to me, albeit with adjustments. Among them nonviolence and equal respect for all faiths seem especially pertinent with respect to the present topic. Gandhi said that nonviolence is the minimal form that love takes and that love is the maximal form of nonviolence. Given that, the traditional catering to social harmony in Hinduism should logically be extended to non-Hindu views and ways of life that Hindus come in contact with. Personally, I do not see a need to revise the four values of life in Hinduism. They are universally human and, as a set, quite comprehensive. True, Gandhi minimized two of them and optimized the other two.

Madhyama: Elaborate on this, Navin. Do not assume we all know everything you know about Hinduism.

Navin: The four values are traditionally called *purusharthas*, which literally means . . .

Sanatan: Objects of human effort.

Navin: Thanks, Sanatan. They are called *kama, artha, dharma* and *moksha.* We have alluded to them previously but they always bear reaffirmation. They also appear differently in different contexts. I would render them in English as physical needs, social values, moral obligation and spiritual experience. As Sanatan aptly put it, the goal that sages had in their minds when they formulated elaborate moral obligations of individuals and groups was everyone achieving all the four goals of life without unnecessary conflict with others. The question is how we can adjust these obligations to accommodate rights consciousness of groups and non-Hindu views and ways of life around.

Sanatan: You can expect that as a conservative Hindu, I am for the minimum possible modification of the structure envisaged by the sages. Their wisdom, as embodied in the scriptural texts called the *smritis,* should not be played with without restraint. The sages themselves allow for adjustments due to *desha* or place, *kala* or times and *apatti* or emergency. I am ready to grant that we live in times where adjustments are called for. But I want to see changes that are minimally necessary and are as unintrusive as we can make them.

Navin: *Satya* or truth and *ahimsa* or nonviolence are the key concepts in Gandhian philosophy that drive Gandhian reform. Gandhi said that he found them in Hinduism. Let us assume that conservative Hinduism has no significant issue with them. From the ethical point of view, as well as from our commitment to karma as the guiding principle of fairness in our definition of Hinduism, *satya* can be understood to imply that fairness in adjudicating the rights-oriented claims of various groups should be practiced on a priority basis. So, it should be fairness as right rather than might as right. Similarly, *ahimsa* or nonviolence as Gandhi understood it implies that open-ended dialog and good-faith negotiation should be at the heart of all attempts at adjudication rather than threats or bribes.

Gandhi held that forms of government are not as important as the good will of the people in governing themselves. Given this, the ideological struggles are discounted as results of establishing regimes that range from communist to right wing dictatorships. If we educate people to accept *satya* and *ahimsa* as their guiding principles, the principles in turn will nurture them and benefit them.

Sanatan: Oh, I can remember a Sanskrit maxim that says *dharmo rakshati rakshitah,* which means that, if you protect righteousness, righteousness will protect you, in turn.

Navin: Gandhi's point with forms of government was that any form can be corrupted by groups or individuals acting in blind pursuit of their self-interest and in flagrant disregard of others' interests involved. Values education, therefore, had a high priority for him.

Sanatan: You know what, Navin, I cannot contest that priority myself, being involved as I am in a conservative institute of education. It seems that Gandhi, after all, was not an enemy of conservatism.

Navin: I am glad you see the matter that way. The educational system that the British imposed has taken deep roots . . .

Mahila: as can be seen from the Westernized writers on Hinduism parroting what their Western masters think about Hinduism . . .

Sanatan: A good example, Mahila!

Navin: That system needs to be overhauled in favor of education that speaks to human ethical values rather than merely satisfy the need to learn a craft for livelihood.

Sanatan: You are speaking my language, Navin!

Sevak: Both of you, rather, are speaking the language of Hinduism?

Navin: Again, we find ourselves united in Hinduism. Now, if we extend the same concepts of *satya* and *ahimsa* to non-Hindu elements inside and outside the Hindu society, we may find the same results emanating from fairness and dialog.

Sanatan: At this point, I will say we conservatives are not at loggerheads with you reformists, Navin. Looks like Hinduism in us brings us together, at least on the points we were addressing.

Darshana: I am glad Navin and Sanatan settled the score between their viewpoints so amicably. For once my logical meddling was not needed.

Madhyama: I am glad too that my skills of conflict resolution were not needed either. What is happening to the world?!

Mahila: Peace is breaking out!

Sanskriti: That would be the day!

Sevak: Let's be realistic. Things won't work out this way all the time. Any issues that demand attention on Navin's presentation?

Sanatan: I am sorry I am involving myself in this session so much, but there was a matter from the last session, where I presented conservative Hinduism, that was postponed to this session where Navin has presented reform Hinduism.

Sanskriti: I remember that. We might as well dispose it off now.

Mahila: You need to refresh our memory on that, Sanskriti.

Sanskriti: Sanatan's Goyandka list included the item called *brahma-charya* usually rendered as celibacy. Sanatan asked Navin about how Gandhi approached it and we desisted from digressing at that point, postponing the issue for this session.

Navin: Well, the ball's in my court now. Gandhi was adamant on the celibacy aspect of *brahma-charya* and said that it was not just an ascetic restraint. He credited it with the strength of vision and courage of conviction he acquired in his life. He also thought that humans, because of base instinct and social indoctrination, spend too much of their time and resources on sexual gratification, which can be better spent on positive work that would relieve injustice, poverty and suffering in the world.

Sanskriti: But, Navin, what would you expect people to do when injustice, poverty and suffering are finally gone from their midst? Do you want them to practice celibacy forever? What is the point in denying simple joys of life that nature or God has designed for humans, especially within the social boundaries of marriage? Why not let people decide whether they want to have just stronger vision and courage of conviction or balance it with simple positive fulfillment that life offers without much cost, especially in case of married couples? In other words, why impose a dire ascetic practice, in however glorified an image, on people who would be unable to practice it anyhow?

Navin: Gandhi said that those who practice continence or celibacy discover its umpteen benefits from the viewpoint of spirituality and also physical health. There is a long and sustained tradition confirming it not

only in Hinduism but practically in all religions of the world. Only in very recent times it has become permissible to speak openly in favor of sexual matters.

Sanskriti: Thank God that finally we are released from an unhealthy age-old ban on conjugal bliss. There are things that deserve to be preserved and others that are not. I do not think that conjugal bliss is just a current fashion. Yes, in the older days there were concerns about unwanted pregnancy and the stigma attached to it, not to speak of sexually transmitted diseases. There also was a concern, which I share, that permitting conjugal bliss in an open way would lead to promiscuous behavior and its attendant consequences on family and community. But when these concerns are no more applicable or are taken care of, there should not be a need for a continued hush-hush ban on the matter.

Also, Hindu culture, of all the cultures in the world, has given the world its earliest texts on sexology. Unlike Christianity and Islam in their puritan forms, Hinduism has not shied away from recognizing the need and value for sex, albeit in the regulated fashion as between a married couple. As a matter of fact, the top four values of life we just talked about include kama whose prime example is sex itself. Why not look at the positive aspects of it where mutuality and enhancement of its quality are discussed rather than continuing an outright ban, which does not stand to reason in this day and age? I am asking for a restoration of yesterday's Hinduism where a sage called Vatsyanana Muni gave a celebrated Sanskrit text called the *Kama-sutra* or Treatise on Sex. How can we have a Hinduism for Today which wants to stay in bed with medieval and Victorian Christianity rather than face its own more enlightened practice of yesterday that is in harmony with today's thinking backed by medical science? Sorry about the bed metaphor but I couldn't pass it up.

Anish: Sanskriti has made an eloquent plea. My limited knowledge of history tells me that the puritanical attitude toward sex in Hinduism started to appear as a consequence of Islamic rule in India that had puritanical elements. Puritanism was reinforced by the Victorian British morality, which was notoriously puritanical too. True, there were puritanical elements in Hinduism as they are in all world religions but Hinduism does seem to have had a more enlightened attitude in the past but it seems to have vanished under the influence of foreign rules. Or, is my history wrong?

Sanatan: Regardless of historical accuracy on the origins of Hindu Puritanism, ascetic practices as a spiritual means have a very ancient home in Hinduism. There is a sustained tradition in Hinduism that celebrates celibacy and narrates its spiritual benefits and virtues. It is admitted that celibacy is extremely hard to practice and there are many stories about how even sages have been tempted to break their vows of celibacy. So, strangely as it may seem, I have to go along with Navin and his very traditional stand on the matter as affirmed by Gandhi. In fact, I have to commend Gandhi for bringing this issue out in the open, for suffering through the needless notoriety as a consequence and for steadfastly refusing to budge on it.

Darshana: Where is our moderator when we need her? Madhyama, can you resolve this strange confluence of conservatism and reformism ganged up against Hinduism of yesterday and a perceived need of today?

Madhyama: Both sides seem to be dug in. Each has made a strong case.

Sevak: Did I not warn that we are not going to resolve every issue that arises here? If we could resolve everything, everything would have already been resolved some time ago. We got to accept reality at times. What I find to be commendable is that both sides of the issues have taken responsible positions. None of the two positions can be regarded as wanton and licentious on the one hand or untraditional and unrepresentative of Hinduism on the other hand. I am tempted to say, "Travelling on the road, when you come to a fork, take it."

Darshana: When Madhyama and Sevakji give up. I should be the one left with the responsibility to show some philosophical escape route. But I too find myself caught between the horns of a dilemma. At this point I urge us all not to lose heart or hope but to ask your conscience or best intuition to guide you. Take whichever side of the fork you decide on. Or, feel free to work out your own compromise position. Be glad that you have the freedom to do this on your own. Enjoy this little liberty. You can even vacillate between the two positions and enjoy the swing without guilt! There seems just no easy simple answer to the issue.

Also ponder how conservatism and reformism are not as far apart as they are popularly made out to be. Let us now devote ourselves to constructing our Hinduism for Today on lines of a moderate Hinduism.

Sevak: Thanks, Darshana, for this admonition. Madhyama is the one who will lead us on moderate Hinduism at the next session. She is going

to talk to Darshana, me and all others in the group about fine and gross points that arise in her mind as she puts together a challenging construction. Let us all wish her the best in this worthy endeavor,

All: All the best, Madhyama!

Madhyama: Thank you, all! I look forward to seeing you.

Sevak: *Namas-te*, everyone!

All: *Namas-te*, Sevakji.

SESSION 7:

A MODERATE HINDUISM IN A HUNDRED WORDS

Sevak: *Om Tat Sat*, everybody.

All: *Om Tat Sat*, Sevakji.

Sevak: Welcome back! Please make yourselves comfortable. At the last session we had our first encounter with a brick wall. We are still here, a bit bruised yet in good shape.

Anish: Sevakji, as someone said, you put your best foot forward and get stepped upon: that's life!

Mahila: We haven't been doing badly at all. Let us take heart and move on with our mission of constructing a good solid Hinduism for Today. Minor setbacks shouldn't deter us. In fact, I had worried at the outset if we would get along and get anywhere. But, lo and behold, we have done great.

Sevak: Thank you for your support. With mutual cooperation, we will continue to make steady progress. You're right; nothing goes up in a straight line. In reality, we had gone up a steep curve. So, we need to think positive and stay positive. And, we have good reason to. Let us move on.

First of all, let me invite Sanatan this time to summarize last session's proceedings.

Sanatan: Thank you, Sevakji, for trusting a conservative to summarize a reformist's perspective. Let us see how I render justice to this assignment.

Navin presented his own version of a reformist's Hinduism. He is deeply influenced by Mahatma Gandhi and his narrative has enhanced my esteem of Gandhi considerably. I now see Gandhi, as a result of Navin's narrative, as closer to the sage ideal of conservative Hinduism. Navin presented the famous eleven vows that Gandhi enforced in his *ashram* or commune. Emphasizing that these should be taken as *maha-vrata* or great vows meant that Gandhi indeed was seriously committed to their practice, implementation and application for spiritual life of the commune members.

The eleven vows started with the two key concepts called *satya* or truth and *ahimsa* or nonviolence. Navin explained how they worked as the source concepts from which others can be derived.

Darshana: Sanatan, the derivation is not strictly deductive. Nevertheless, there is significant conceptual connection involved in the derivation.

Sanatan: Thank you, Darshana, for the fine logical point of clarification. The total list of eleven compared with my own list of forty in the previous session, which I based on Goyandka's list. Navin explained each item in the list and showed how some of them, untouchability for example, emerged from Gandhi's historical situation in the needs of Hinduism of the time and how others were universal in concept. I questioned Navin on applying his reformist vision based on *satya* and *ahimsa* to two issues of concern in constructing a Hinduism for Today. The two issues were, one, the current rise of sundry groups in and around Hindu society and their disruptive impact on Hinduism. Two, there is the issue of non-Hindu elements within and without the Hindu fold and how Hinduism should face them and deal with them. To his credit, Navin answered both my queries with great acumen, applying the concepts of truth and nonviolence faithfully and consistently without losing either fairness or friendliness toward the parties involved. Of course he dealt with the matter in terms of generalities and I myself did not envisage specifics for an answer. So, I should judge Navin's handling of the issues to be truly creditable.

Toward the end, a question arose about the place of sex within marriage. Sanskriti, to be fair to her, made a forceful case for a strong inclusion or rather retention of sex in marriage. Navin, remaining true to Gandhi's outlook on the matter, opposed this and advocated a minimal role for sex in marriage. I supported him on this, for the conservative position of the Hindu tradition in my view has strongly supported celibacy even in marriage as far as possible. In fact, Hindu sages have consistently regarded celibacy as the litmus test of one's self-control, which is the hallmark of spiritual progress and achievement. Anish, however, supported Sanskriti, citing certain other features of Hindu history. We as a group could not resolve the matter as we just referred to at the outset of this session.

Overall, I commend Navin very highly for a great presentation from the reformist's perspective. Just as I was selective in my own way in presenting Hindu conservatism, Navin too showed his individuality in presenting and interpreting his vision of reform Hinduism.

Darshana: Sanatan, you made a telling summary of the last session, which saw Navin's reformist vision of Hinduism. For you, following Goyandka, one is a better Hindu in proportion to the extent one imbibes the forty virtues. For Navin, who followed Gandhi, one is a better Hindu in as much as he or she observes the eleven vows. We now have two solid visions of Hinduism from two ends of the spectrum, namely, conservatism and reformism. Obviouly, they do not exhaust the possibilities and alternatives at the ends of the spectrum, let alone anything in between. But they serve as good road-marks for us to ponder as we travel on our road to a solid Hinduism for Today

Sevak: Thank you, Darshana, for your thoughtful commentary. Thank you, Sanatan, for the pithy summary of the last session. Many thanks to Navin for a very insightful presentation of a reformist's vision of Hinduism.

Today's session is the one where we as a group of Hindus representing a diversity of perspectives will articulate the group's vision of Hinduism for Today.

Sanatan: Sorry to interrupt, Sevakji, but we just might be *beginning* to articulate our vision. I am afraid it may take us more than one session to go through all that we need to.

Sevak: I stand corrected, Sanatan. You are right. Anyhow, today we begin articulating our vision for Hinduism for Today. It is a significant step for all of us. Without any doubt it is going to be Madhyama's day. She has worked very hard since our last session. You all know that. She has had extensive and intensive discussions with Darshana and me on both the general structure of what she is going to call her moderate Hinduism and a number of wide-ranging subtleties involved in her ambitious project.

Madhyama also has held conferences with all the other members of our group, discussing a number of issues as they arose during her conversations with herself and all of us. I speak of her conversations with herself with a unique emphasis, for it was evident to me as I talked to her that she was actually going through a dialog with herself from a variety of angles and sub-visions, which arose in her mind as the thoughtful outcome from her desire and endeavor to do best justice to the job. Her dedication to the subject and her acute thinking on the subject were a pleasant surprise to Darshana and me. But, why don't I let you be the judge for, soon, you will be tasting the proverbial pudding?

Darshana: I want to echo Sevakji's thoughts and sentiments. Madhyama has done an awesome job. I am proud of her. But, after all, I am a philosopher and so believe in, or rather cannot help but subject everything to, rational criticism with the purpose of making sure the result is as close to that ever-elusive perfection. So, I will expect and request all of you to do the same and subject Madhyama's presentation to questions, doubts and critique with a view to ultimately construct a comprehensive and cohesive outcome. I know Madhyama would not like it any other way, either.

Madhyama: You said it, Darshana. The project meant a lot to me and yet I wanted its result to be a sort of a collective outcome for all of us. I am deeply grateful to all of you, especially Sevakji and Darshana, for the tremendous help and encouragement each of you provided me. I will bear the final responsibility for the inevitable problem areas that may linger in my presentation. But all the credit, if any, in the presentation and its substance, must go to all of you who have energized and inspired me all the way.

My idea in the project of moderate Hinduism was manifold. I wanted to be comprehensive, not leaving out any major and significant area or conceptual territory unexplored or unconsidered. Of course it is not possible to please anyone and everyone, not to speak of anybody in particular. But, because Hinduism, as we have seen, embraces the whole of life more than many other endeavors, it is particularly important to be as inclusive as possible. The goal of inclusive comprehensiveness, therefore, reflects a very salient feature of Hinduism. It should, however, become a collective benchmark for us so that you should turn it back to me and use it to nudge me on any way that you think I have been less comprehensive than what is desirable. The caveat is that I cannot be just a compiler and, so, have not sought merely to make a list of all major aspects. This brings me to the second goal.

The second goal in my manifold idea was coherence. I wanted the structure to have a certain unity and mutual internal compatibility. This may not be a very happy way of putting it stylistically. But, it is important to me now, especially through my talks with Darshana, that a conscious attempt should be made to smooth out all rough edges in a structure that is going to bear your name to any extent. For one thing it shows that you are careful, serious and thoughtful. Further, its appeal is greatly enhanced if the whole thing hangs together as a cogent unit. Whether coherence gets us closer to truth is a matter that I will leave philosophers like Darshana to sort out.

Darshana: That's not very easy to sort out, Madhyama, as we found out in one of our intense conversations. But I'd surmise that the appeal of coherence has to go beyond just an aesthetic pleasantness. How far toward truth and reality it takes us all by itself I cannot yet tell. I have been building a philosophy and this issue is an important part of it but I will not inflict that conceptual injury on you philosophically innocent folks.

Anish: Darshana, we are not just philosophically innocent but may be philosophically challenged as well.

Sanskriti: Count me among those philosophically challenged mere mortals.

Madhyama: Any way, I am not going to count any of you out of my consideration. In any case I would want you to assess how well I have achieved the second goal of coherence. Make the whole piece better by telling me how it can be more cohesive. The third purpose in my project was to build on and around our definition of Hinduism and the four values of Hindu life. I have made a particular use of my four-point brief definition of Hinduism. Or, I should rather call it a working description as we thought about it earlier. Building on or at least consciously using what we have gone through should give us a sense of continuity.

The fourth aim in my efforts was to benefit from the two perspectives on Hinduism we have already seen presented to us by Sanatan and Navin. I sensed that both Sanatan and Navin had more to say about their perspectives than they had time to go into in their presentations. I met with them and elicited some more important aspects from the conservative and reform standpoints. I thought about them and tried to build my construction in view of their values and insights.

Finally, my fifth goal was to be myself, that is, place myself at the center of polarizing issues and positions, cull what I find to be the best in them and build on them, together with my own insights. You people are going to excuse me, though, if I cannot tell you exactly what I got from whom and what is just mine. When I think about the matter as I look back on it, I myself can't quite tell always what piece comes from which person or position. I often intuitively put things together after a deep perusal. The point is that, if I fail to give credit to whom it is due, I want to apologize in advance. In any case, I accept responsibility for the blemishes that remain.

I think I got out before you briefly the manifold idea I kept in my mind as I worked on the project.

Mahila: Madhyama, I am sure I am not speaking just for myself here when I say that you have taken precious time of yours and tried hard to learn from all of us what you could. At the same time, it is clear to us that the articulation you will be presenting is your own and we won't take away the credit for it that rightly belongs to you. Thank you for your intense efforts. They have made us feel proud of you and we are looking forward to the outcome such as is at hand.

Sevak: Mahila speaks for all of us, Madhyama. Thank you for an exemplary endeavor. We want to hear from you now and we promise that we will subject your statements to respectful scrutiny so that the final outcome is as good as it can be for at least all of us and hopefully for all Hindus out there who are interested in learning about what we are up to. Also, I do not want to ignore the significant utility of the outcome for the humanity at large.

Sanatan: I have been talking to Navin and we want to state that we were quite impressed by Madhyama's consistent attitude of thinking quickly to focus on what is positive in our differing perspectives and then integrating them in a sort of a middle way. True to her name, Madhyama excels in finding the middle way without making us feel as if we were compromised in any significant manner. What do you say, Navin?

Navin: I agree whole-heartedly with Sanatan.

Mahila: Good to see the two of you in agreement, for a change. Oh, I got to amend this. How can I forget you two ganging up against Sanskriti and Anish at the end of last session? You guys are unpredictable!

Navin, Sanatan: What does a woman want?!

Mahila: Krishna! At least that is what this woman wants.

Sanatan: Power to you, Mahila!

Navin: I must say the project on moderate Hinduism was made to order for Madhyama. Sanatan and I have seen her work spontaneously toward deriving a synthesis of divergent views with remarkable ease. While we two frequently find ourselves moving impulsively to our pet extremes, Madhyama has the quality and attitude to internalize what is good in our positions and combine it all in one piece. Neither one of us will say that we are pleased with her results all the time, but we cannot but be

impressed by the way she can find a constructive middle way between our positions. As she makes her presentation, we are sure to see this in action.

Madhyama: Well, I have worked in conflict resolution area for some time. But human beings never cease to challenge me. Often, when I have thought that I can work with any pair of opposing views in a snap, I have run into difficult and trying situations. I do enjoy, however, building bridges between conflicting viewpoints. Sanatan, is there a Hindu scriptural support for a middle way or an attitude of balancing opposing stances?

Sanatan: The Gita talks about something similar in chapter 6, verses 16 and 17. In 16 it asks to avoid extremes in eating, sleeping and waking. In 17 it says one's intake, output, conduct, sleep and waking should be balanced. Coming to think of it, I should take heed myself! May be the Gita has been telling me while I have not been very heedful, that I should avoid being a committed conservative all the time.

Navin: And I should take heed to not be a reformist all the time!

Sevak: Among world religions, Confucius made a strong point of advocating the middle way. Not to minimize the Buddha who called his own view the middle path. He even articulated how each item in his eightfold path was a middle between extremes.

Darshana: I can't let this thread go without mentioning Aristotle, who said that many virtues were the middle between extremes. Such as courage is the middle and, therefore, the virtue between two extremes or vices of rashness and cowardice.

Madhyama: Thanks, everybody, for such prestigious support! I feel roundly vindicated.

Sanskriti: I and Mahila are getting a little impatient. While all of us show ourselves to be good Hindus by taking it all easy and being relaxed about the passage of time, it is not entirely without virtue to strike a middle there too and exhibit a certain frenzy occasionally. Why not let Madhyama start her presentation?

Sevak: Sanskriti and Mahila are right. Let Madhyama begin her articulation.

Madhyama: Well, I mentioned my fivefold idea or rather five goals that I aimed at in my project. Before I begin my presentation of the resulting configuration for Hinduism, I must mention three characteristics I have learned to imbibe from Sevakji. Accordingly, I am going to try to incorporate clarity of thought in the project. Sevakji truly instilled the value of clear thinking and clear expression in me. As I talked to him about the details of the project and also its overall structure, I became convinced that murkiness is something to be avoided. When I use intuition, as I am often prone to, I tend to let in vague thinking. I really need to prune it. You will be the judge on that and I would like you to hold me to the criterion of clarity of thought and articulation.

Secondly, Sevakji has impressed on me the importance of approaching Hinduism with a positive attitude. Sanatan's Goyandka and Navin's Gandhi are exemplars of positive attitude. Like the legendary swan of Hindu literature, we are asked to focus on the positive and ignore the rest. Remember the swan that separates and consumes only the milk from a mixture of milk and water? This does not mean that I do not find or see anything negative in Hinduism. Yet, if we are going to construct a Hinduism for Today, there is no reason to dwell on, much less incorporate, what I do not find attractive in Hinduism at this point of time anyway.

Third, I want to point out how Sevakji described himself as a constructive Hindu in our very first session. I have learned from him that being constructive means not just being positive and clear but also taking responsibility to seek the needed details and arrange them around the basic design to make a sturdy structure that has no obvious vulnerabilities. Sevakji once said to me that no structure is so strong as to be totally unbreakable and yet we must strive to make it as strong as we can. I have sought to accept this burden but you should judge how successful I have been.

Oh, I don't want to miss putting in a word about what I've learned from Anish, Mahila and Sanskriti. I read their faces right now: they want me to start the substantive part of the presentation. I will be brief. In a nutshell, I learned the importance of relevance from them. Anish showed me how important it is to place Hinduism in the context of secular humanism and scientific attitude, which form a powerful part of today's surroundings. Mahila showed me the importance of making Hinduism for Today socially relevant. Sanskriti impressed me how Hinduism must remain culturally relevant. However, I am not confident enough to say that I have been able to incorporate relevance in all its three forms in my structure in a measure that would satisfy myself, let alone Anish, Mahila and Sanskriti. I have told them of this and they

have promised me that, while I focus on building a structure on the foundations laid by us so far, they will focus on providing the humanistic, social and cultural furniture.

Mahila: Madhyama, I was being impatient along with Sanskriti, but I realize that it is important that we see some details of the methodological parameters you worked with in this ambitiously elaborate undertaking. Yes, Anish, Sanskriti and I will try to do our job of furnishing the structure. But, basically, the structure is very important at this juncture. We together, with the able guidance of Sevakji and Darshana, laid the foundation. Sanatan prepared the back-yard and Navin the front-yard, so to say. It's time for you to erect the structure. Anish, Sanskriti and I will have the burden to provide the furniture. All of us together will then take our shots at the finishing touch.

Sanskriti: I have a feeling I am going to be quite comfortable living in this house we are building. How many people can I bring to the open-house party?!

Anish: Why don't we cross that bridge when we get there? Anyway, I am thrilled by the entire housing project.

All: We all are!

Sevak: Again, let Madhyama start!

Madhyama: Yes, finally! There I am. I am suddenly feeling nervous. But you people are tremendous support. So, I will get through this, I hope.

Darshana: Madhyama, there is nothing to worry. You have given us a very clear and systematic introduction to the careful and detailed work you have done. We look forward to benefitting from it. Go ahead!

Madhyama: Thank you, Darshana. And thanks to all of you.

At the cost of repeating a part of what we covered while deriving our working description of Hinduism, at the outset let me make a brief summary of how a Hindu is identified. Hindus identify themselves in multiple ways. Of course, non-Hindus identify Hindus in no less a variety of ways. To a simple-looking question "Who is a Hindu?" there is no simple answer, unlike questions asking who is a Christian, Jew, Muslim, Buddhist, Confucian, Daoist, even atheist, for example. There

are more or less simple answers to the question when it is applied to adherents of non-Hindu faiths. But even Hindus run into difficulties when facing the question Who Is a Hindu?, let alone others who, being no less bewildered, are quick to reinforce the difficulty of getting a straight and simple answer.

Darshana: A philosopher colleague, who is a stickler for clarity, once said in a moment of cynical exasperation that a Hindu is one who talks tall about *Brahman*, *satya*, *dharma* and Hinduism as great concepts but cannot tell clearly what they are!

All: Oh, Darshana!

Madhyama: That's devastating! I want to run from that cruel joke, though we should not desist from laughing at ourselves occasionally. Let us briefly consider a few major answers to the question of Hindu identity and quickly see their shortcomings. A hostile, alien, superficial and stereotypical answer is that a Hindu is one who worships cows, believes in castes, reveres cobras and is resigned to his karma. It is like saying a Christian is one who worships a crucifix, believes in burning witches, is a big greedy consumer and has multiple spouses though one at a time. Both are not just offensive but evince distortion and misrepresentation not worthy of serious consideration.

Sanatan: Madhyama, The offensive distortion of Hinduism is quite prevalent, while the counter-distortion you present is hardly more than a theoretical construct. I need to point this out because I have been subjected to such hateful distortion from my childhood and it influenced me enough to turn me into a hard-line conservative Hindu while I was a youngster. It took a lot of time and doing to calm myself down. So many of my younger friends are still angry and reactive precisely because of the insulting distortions of Hinduism frequently hurled at them. While I have found my relative composure to stay at conservative Hinduism, these victims of distortions have moved further to orthodox or even fundamentalist positions in retaliation. Somewhat like African-Americans moving to Islam when they found Christianity not meeting their needs. I am making a point, so don't tell me how my example won't fit like a glove.

Navin: Even Gandhi recalls his school days in his autobiography when missionaries used to place themselves at the gates of schools as students walked into the school. He says the missionaries ridiculed the Hindu

deities, taunted the school children about their religion in offensive or even abusive language and touted Christianity as the sole glorious truth. Those were the days of the British Raj. Gandhi's experience was not uncommon. Hindus are taught from their childhood, and by their own peers, to respect Jesus and founders of other religions as great saint-like figures. Generations of Hindus are then left to puzzle over why their respect for other religions begets habitual hatred from those religions.

Anish: They just want to prove that they are not worthy of the respect we give them.

Sanskriti: I am surprised practically no one cares in those religions how their behavior creates a horrific negative image about them in the minds of Hindus. Is this any way to convert anybody?

Sevak: We got to move on, Just go ahead, Madhyama.

Madhyama: From the so-called historical perspective, we are shown how the word "Hindu" arose out of Greek or Persian invaders hearing about the people on the river Sindhu and applying the label Hindu, for Sindhu, to the people they assailed. Of course this geographical designation does not say anything about who a Hindu is.

Interestingly, in the eyes of Hindu law as it was applied during the British rule and continuing thereafter, a Hindu is one who is born a Hindu. So much so that one cannot choose not to be subjected to Hindu law. Hindu law in India governs matters like marriage, adoption, maintenance, succession and inheritance. As such Hindu law applies to all who are born as Hindus. The only way to avoid the Hindu law for a born Hindu is to officially and legally change one's religion to another religion.

Anish: You're kidding, Madhyama!

Mahila: No, Anish. She is on track. Remember that a few years ago a scandal arose when some famous movie actors became nominal Muslims in order to avoid paying alimony to their wives and support to their children while marrying another woman. The actor would claim the right to have up to four wives without having to divorce his existing Hindu wife.

Anish: Only in India!

Sevak: Let me remind you of our ban on politics. We might be on the verge of entering politics.

Madhyama: Let me go on to the next way of answering the question Who is a Hindu. Some thinkers have come up with the residuary definition of a Hindu. They suggest that, because Hindus believe in so many mutually conflicting religious ideas, it is best to call a Hindu in India anyone who does not belong to any clear religion like Christianity, Islam, Judaism, Buddhism, Jainism or Sikhism. All the residuary people can be safely and clearly called Hindus!

Anish: Madhyama, how dare these people call themselves "thinkers"? For, thinking is just what they are not doing. Otherwise, they won't come up with such an empty-headed non-identification of a Hindu.

Sanskriti: So much for the so-called residuary definition of a Hindu. I would call it the leftover definition. In their unthinking minds Hindus are those who are left over after counting all others!

Madhyama: To be fair to them, they are unable to determine an easy and overt sign to identify a Hindu and distinguish him or her from others. They complain that Hindus do not make it easy for them!

Mahila: May be our definition of Hinduism can help them.

Darshana: It does have that potential, if properly applied. We are sort of taking another brief look at these identity markers for Hindus, for we considered many of them when we scrutinized definitions of Hinduism. It is instructive to take another look but let us not dwell on these to the point of repeating ourselves.

Madhyama: Let us ponder two more Western views of who is a Hindu. It will round up our look at how the West tries to identify or distinguish us from others. One is a view attributed to or at least narrated by the noted Sanskrit scholar Max Muller. He used two terms: henotheism and kathenotheism. They are sort of cognate and their difference is not worth splitting hair about. The main point arose out of his observation that a Vedic sage, when invoking a particular deity, extols it to the highest level and does the same when invoking another deity. So, Max Muller deduced that it is a tendency of Vedic poets to regard as supreme any deity that they happen to be praising.

Sanatan: Even in spite of the clear Rigvedic statement *ekam sad vipra bahudha vadanti*, it did not occur to him that the sage sees the same supreme truth in different forms. Unity in plurality is something that just cannot enter their head full of simple-minded theism of a personalistic nature. Well, at this level, this has ceased to surprise me.

Madhyama: The last Western viewpoint on the Hindu identity I want to speak of is the widely prevalent idea among Western and quite a few Westernized Indian scholars that Hinduism is too amorphous to be defined in a clear and forthright manner.

Sanskriti: I had an encounter with a follower of the Hare Krishna movement who approached me asking for donation. Because of his dedicated efforts in spiritual direction I complimented him for the good work he was doing for Hinduism. He surprised me by almost exploding to declare that there is nothing like Hinduism. He asserted that the so-called Hinduism could not be defined because it does not exist. He thought Hinduism was a cultural fiction. Shocked, I asked him his religious identity. He replied saying that he was a believer in "*bhakti* science."

Mahila: Their penchant for exclusivist Krishnaism has mellowed lately. For, they realized that after all it is Hindus who are going to donate and sustain them. They are now more respectful of Hindu deities other than Krishna.

Anish: I am amused at the simple-minded exclusivism of any brand of theism. But Hare Krishnas' attempt at separatism and isolationism seems not just an exercise in exclusivism. It is a superficial act of vainglorious defiance, probably arising from the lack of Hindu roots in the minds of their Western converts with their typical exclusivist and triumphalist background. Just pitiable!

Madhyama: Enough of Western attempts at determining who is a Hindu. The range I have covered depicts a picture of Hinduism in their mind where an attempt is made to make sense of Hinduism in Christian or other Western religious terms. I will come back to a more detailed view of these terms, but let me first give you a few attempts by the Hindus themselves toward self-identity.

Sanatan: Even here I am afraid Hindus who try to define their self-identity under the influence of non-Hindu outlooks are going to fumble and stumble. Only a Hindu viewpoint can articulate the Hindu identity.

Navin: Sanatan, I can understand where you are coming from. But I won't pre-judge the Hindus attempting to clarify their identity. Let us see; there might be something to learn there.

Madhyama: As Darshana said, we have been through this in a way when we dealt with the question of defining Hinduism. Please bear with me if what I say overlaps somewhat with what we have already traversed. But it bears a sort of relevance in the present context.

Darshana: I agree, Madhyama. Slight repetition won't kill us. In real life we routinely go through much that is worse. On top, you are just trying to create the context for what Hinduism should be like at this point of time. Go ahead as long as we don't drive ourselves into needless repetition.

Madhyama: Thanks, Darshana. Any way, I will be rather brief and illustrative in talking about Hindus' attempt at self-identification. I will mention three types of attempt. One is traditional. Another is modern and the third is kind of super-inclusive. The three together will present a contrast with the non-Hindu attempts.

The traditional view says that a Hindu is one who accepts the authority of the Vedas. I know Sanatan takes kindly to this view, so why don't I let him speak of the merits of this traditional way of looking at Hinduism?

Sanatan: Indeed, I have a soft corner for this view. It is clear and it has worked to distinguish Hindus from others that the Hindus encountered in their history of the last couple of thousand years. Jains, Buddhists and Charvakas stand out from Hindus exactly on the point of their not accepting the authority of the Vedas. This way of identifying Hindus also can unite the Hindus around their own Vedic scriptures.

Navin: Now, Sanatan, I won't dispute that the Veda-based self-identity can work for Hindus in terms of distinguishing them from even other non-Hindus like Christians, Jews, Muslims, Sikhs, Zoroastrians, Confucians, Daoists and so on. But the Vedas themselves are not unanimously defined. Nor is there unanimity about how to understand them.

Sanatan: Navin, I am willing to accept a broad definition of the Vedas as the entire *shruti* literature. I am also willing to live with different interpretations of the Vedas and regard them all as Hindu. I would surely prefer my understanding of the purport of the Vedas, which is shared by quite a few millions of Hindus. But I won't dis-Hinduize anybody for interpreting the Vedas differently or selectively emphasizing different parts of the *shruti* than mine.

Navin: That's very generous of you, Sanatan. I begin to see that our difference is not as wide as it may appear at first sight. We reformists usually emphasize parts of the *shruti* that have universal moral appeal.

Sanatan: And we traditionalists do not disagree with that but we certainly won't let go of sacred rituals and sacraments . . .

Navin: Which are not tremendously important in our view. But would you refuse to call us Hindus on that account?

Sanatan: No, but we won't regard you as traditional, conservative or orthodox Hindus.

Madhyama: In that case, the identity of Hindus is not as much in question as that of conservative or reform Hindus. As a moderate or centrist Hindu, I would like to integrate what is significant and beneficial in both of your views. I have learnt this from Sevakji. From Darshana I have learnt that I do not want to force a reconciliation between you two just for the sake of reconciliation. The purpose is not to compel either one to accept anything that the other does not accept. When there is a clear difference and the two just stand out separately, a constructive centrist will not design a third position with which to replace the two in conflict.

Anish: Sounds good, Madhyama, but then what does the constructive centrist actually do in this frequently encountered conflict situation?

Madhyama: Anish, what a constructive centrist should do here is construct a position that lets the best of both to operate. His or her position will keep the essentials on which both agree, will eliminate what is destructive of the harmonious co-existence of both and will let live different ways to operate for both as long as they do not create disharmony. Of course the constructive centrist will encourage and foster benign tolerance and amicable understanding among the

conflicting sides. Indifference and mutual neglect must be discouraged, let alone envy and acrimony.

Sevak: Madhyama, you are choosing the right words for a true and committed constructivism. Very realistic. You seem to be embodying a pluralism or relativism without sacrificing an essential ground on which the plurality and relativity can live together. Am I voicing your stance correctly?

Madhyama: You are, Sevakji.

Darshana: Madhyama, you have enunciated a form or philosophy of thoughtful integration that is realistic as well as challenging. It is neither simplistic not platitudinous. My philosophical concern with relativism and pluralism is that both tend to be doctrinaire, vacuous and self-righteous even as they criticize absolutism and dogmatism in a similar vein. They often assert themselves as just what is needed in face of inevitable conflict. What you say has a solid tinge of pragmatism and realism. What you say is not easy or just rhetorical. It will take intellectual work to form a clear articulation. More importantly, though, it is firmly grounded on a foundational essence on which the conflicting parties do not disagree.

You will still need to overcome two obstacles. One, how do you get to that foundational essence? And, even more challengingly, how do you keep it from being dogmatic in a culpable sense?

Madhyama: In my conversations with Sevakji and Darshana I did touch upon these issues. I thought about them on the lines suggested by both of them and have come to my tentative results or conclusions. I do not want to take credit for them, however, for I feel that all three of us should properly be regarded as their author because we have worked on them in the spirit of intimate collaboration.

However, I want to complete the three Hindu ways of self-identification before returning to these issues between Sanatan and Navin and the ones that Darshana has articulated and Sevakji has helped me work with.

Sevak: Darshana and I are willing to grant full credit of authorship to Madhyama since she is the one who has worked on the issues, albeit with the help and encouragement that we were so happy to provide. In any case, it makes sense for Madhyama to complete the three Hindu ways of self-identification that she has embarked upon.

Madhyama: The first view I was talking about was the traditional view of anchoring Hindu identity to the primary scriptures known as Vedas or the *shruti* literature. The second view comes from the great poet Rabindranath Tagore. We have alluded to his book before. The book was called *Religion of Man* where he pointed out that Hinduism was the human religion or *manava-dharma*. He made an eloquent appeal to the universal features of religion that all humanity can embrace in the form of a universal spirituality. He showed in the book how Hinduism as a heart-felt spirituality was the name of what lies at the inmost depths of human heart everywhere. I was reminded of Confucian concept of *jen* or humanness while reading Tagore's book.

Sevak: Very insightful observation, Madhyama, bringing Tagore in relation to Confucius.

Madhyama: Thank you, Sevakji. I would like to draw everybody's attention to the idea of essence or foundation on which I want to base plurality and relativity. Probably I want to articulate it more sharply than Tagore but in full cognizance of his insight.

Mahila: I cannot wait for Madhyama to get to her articulation of the essential.

Sanskriti: I am anxious to get there too.

Anish: But let us have her finish the third and last Hindu view.

Madhyama: That is the super-inclusive one. It simply is that a Hindu is anyone who wants to call oneself a Hindu. If someone wants to adopt the label "Hindu," no more should be required of him or her to prove or authenticate his or her Hindu identity.

Navin: Truly inclusive right in the spirit of Hindu inclusiveness. I am pretty open and yet I will say there is some vacuousness about this wide-open view.

Sanatan: I think Anish pointed out earlier that if you keep your mind too open, people will throw all kinds of garbage in it?

Madhyama: Agreed that this view is too open and calls out for a modicum of specificity.

Sanskriti: I am dying to hear Madhyama's construction of the essential. But at this stage I feel I want to know from her what characteristics would she approve of or look for in her quest of what Hindu identity should be like.

Mahila: I feel the same way. Madhyama, before you proceed further, can you give some general features of what Hindu identity should be like in your view of moderate Hinduism? I need something to look at when you give me your final outcome so that I can check out your view and see how it meets the demands of those features. Nothing too elaborate, Madhyama. Just a bare outline will do.

Madhyama: Sure, I will be brief. If I ask myself the question as to what Hindu identity should be like, I can come up with four criteria. First is that the Hindu identity should be positive and neither negative nor neutral, given the long history of Hinduism and the basic need and right of a Hindu to a minimal self-esteem that every other religious believer has always claimed irrespective of their history or record. Next, it should be wide and inclusive and neither narrow nor exclusive, primarily because Hinduism has historically been tolerant of other faiths that it has come in contact with and has a record of integrating with other faiths of its historical association more so than many another faith. Thirdly, it should be able to describe itself within its own nature, not needing a conceptual or historical dependence on anything outside itself. That means a Hindu should not have to borrow his or her identity from another belief by way of imitation or contrast. For, if it cannot stand on its own feet, it must forfeit its right to self-esteem and, if it cannot say what it is without contrasting with some other belief, it does not have authentic self-existence. Finally, it should be externally distinct, so that it won't easily be confused with another belief.

Sanatan: Madhyama, does not your third feature draw upon the traditional Hindu idea of *svarupa-lakshana* and the fourth feature rely on the idea of *tatastha-lakshana*? We discussed these two when we dealt with the question of defining Hinduism.

Madhyama: Yes, Sanatan. That is very observant of you.

Darshana: Madhyama, your four features or criteria of Hindu identity look quite cogent and sound to me. You stated them clearly too.

Sevak: I agree with Darshana. Very perceptive and forcefully put, Madhyama.

Madhyama: Thank you, Sevakji and Darshana. I appreciate your generous words, especially as they come from you two.

Sevak: Now, applying these criteria, can you briefly state the positive features of the Hindu identity itself, Madhyama?

Madhyama: Yes, Sevakji. For that I will simply go back to the way I summarized in four principles the eleven-point working description that we achieved at the end of our discussion of the definition of Hinduism.

Anish: Madhyama, I would like you to restate that now in the present context.

Madhyama: Sure, Anish. In sum, a Hindu is one who is generally friendly to these four propositions: 1. There is one spiritual being underlying the universe. 2. It can be spoken of in many ways. 3. It can be reached through many paths. 4. All humans are accountable for their actions.

Anish: Excellent, Madhyama. Even I as an atheistic Hindu won't be able to object strongly to your four propositions, especially the way you put the law of karma in the fourth proposition.

Sanatan: I must concur with Madhyama's propositions from my conservative viewpoint too. Anish spoke about the fourth proposition. I would like to underline the first three propositions by showing how they are supported by Hindu source scriptures. The first and second statements are directly supported by the celebrated Rig-vedic statement *ekam sad vipra bahudha vadanti*, which means "wise sages speak of the same one being in many ways." The first by *ekam sat* or "one being" and second by *vipra bahudha vadanti* or "the wise speak of in many ways". The third statement, that regarding the many paths, is strengthened by Lord Krishna's assurance in the Gita, *ye yatha mam pra-padyante tans tathaiva bhajamyaham,* meaning "he, Lord Krishna, approaches all devotees in terms of the way they approach him". There is a famous saying, called a *su-bhashita* in Sanskrit, *sagarat patitam toyam yatha gachchhati sagaram, sarva-deva-namaskarah keshavam prati-gachchhati.* I cannot locate the source of this saying right away, though. But it means that, just as water raining from cloud in the sky

finally ends up in the ocean, devotion to whatever god reaches Krishna in the end.

Sanskriti: I like the poetic sentiment of the last verse you cited, Sanatan.

Mahila: How can I fail to appreciate it too? After all, it refers to my Meera's Krishna!

Navin: I am happy to join this beauteous confluence of like-minded Hindus. I agree Madhyama has achieved a beautiful and succinctly stated set of four propositions that capture the Hindu identity in a ready, easy and a deceptively simple way.

Darshana: Concise as well as precise is, indeed, Madhyama's set of four. A philosopher's delight too.

Sanskriti: I am ready to dance to the four in the fast and lively rhythm of the kaharva meter: dha ge na ti na ke dhin, dha!

Sevak: Don't leave me behind, Sanskriti, this older man would prefer the slow kaharva of eight beats.

Sanskriti: I will grant the eight beats to you, Sevakji. It won't be bad, as long as it is not the boring and ponderous slow ektal: dhin dhin dhage tirkat tu na kat ta dhage tirkat tu na, dhin.

Darshana: Hey Sanskriti, but its twelve beats cover all the twelve months of the year, in my mind.

Sanskriti: But, Darshana, it takes a whole year to complete just one *avartana* or cycle! I would get old by then!

Sevak: And, Sanskriti, ektal is not just ponderous, it is sonorous too?

Sanskriti: Well, I will grant it to you not-so-young folks! But the present moment does not bring up my mood toward meditation.

Sevak: I guess we older folks will have to resign to the ways of younger folks at some moments.

Mahila: Think of it this way, Sevakji. We provide a chance to you to feel younger.

Sevak: What did I say? We will resign to just feeling young.

Darshana: And remember, reality will catch up with you young guys one day.

Mahila: How about this way of resolving the age issue for us? Madhyama's four propositions are timeless and ageless. Can't we rejoice in that?

Sevak: Surely, Mahila. Now, getting my feet steady again on the earth, I would like Madhyama to tell us briefly how her four-fold Hindu identity fares in terms of the various belief forms of world religions or religion substitutes.

Madhyama: Sevakji, do you mean the belief forms like monotheism, polytheism, etc.?

Sevak: Exactly, Madhyama.

Madhyama: I will try. Correct me if I make a mistake.

Anish: Hope you won't forget atheism.

Madhyama: How about non-theism? Would that cover you, Anish?

Anish: Not completely, but I will live with it.

Madhyama: Good. I will start with that. Much of Buddhism and aspects of Confucianism and Daoism, as far as I understand them, can be regarded as non-theistic, if not atheistic. Am I right, Sevakji?

Sevak: Yes.

Madhyama: If atheism is a denial of God's existence, non-theism would state that belief in God's existence is not necessary. So, if someone accepts accountability for all actions and selfless service of humanity as a way to reach deeper fulfillment in life, he or she can be friendly to the four fundamental propositions of Hinduism. In this way, not just any atheist or non-theist but one just committed to this accountability and service would not have problem calling oneself a Hindu, if he or she so desires.

Anish: I think I can live with this way of putting the matter. Although at times I am drawn toward materialism in the sense that denies the existence of mind, I stay, largely speaking, within a belief that accepts both mind and matter. This means, I guess, that I am not fundamentally averse to spirituality and spiritual pursuits so long as they do not make trans-human or supernatural claims.

Madhyama: It seems to me that Anish won't have a basic disagreement with non-theistic aspects of Buddhism, Confucianism and Daoism. And if that is the case, he has the potential to be friendly toward Hinduism in its aspects of accountability and service. The question is whether he can be friendly toward the notion that there is one spiritual being underlying the universe. This being of course can be spoken of in many ways. One of them could be that it is the collective humanity in our world. It may be a bit of a stretch, but if Anish can be amicable with it, he has the potential to be quite friendly with the four propositions as a whole in his own way.

Anish: If you put the matter that way and when I also consider my linkages with a lot of cultural aspects in my life, I can say I can be friendly toward this way of looking at or rather having a Hindu identity. It does allow me to be myself without falling apart in a substantial way. There is a bit of a stretch, as Madhyama puts it. I can stay with it, though, without a serious grudge or bitterness. I see that it will let me grow spiritually in my own way without pushing me out. My sense of community will also help me stay with and reinforce such Hindu identity.

Madhyama: I feel great not losing Anish. How about you, folks?

All: Welcome to our Hinduism, Anish.

Anish: I feel great too, being a Hindu of this genre. Looks like Hinduism of Madhyama's conception, or rather our conception, can allow for quite a variety of genres. If it can adopt me, it can adopt many.

Darshana: Well put, Anish. We won't get everyone, but we'll get a lot. I would like Madhyama to resume the thread of placing Hinduism of our conception in terms of various belief forms.

Madhyama: Atheism and non-theism in their humanistic forms, in this way of looking at them, can be seen to be at least religion substitutes if

not religions by themselves. Agnosticism, which asserts unknowability of God, can also be seen in the same light. We can then turn to theistic varieties, which have been more vocally associated with religion in general. How am I doing, Sevakji?

Sevak: Quite well, Madhyama. Keep it up. I will jump in if you say something that bears concern.

Madhyama: Thanks, Sevakji. Theistic forms assume quite a few shapes. Mainly speaking, they are monotheism, polytheism, pantheism and panentheism. Briefly, theism itself implies a personal God, who is the creator and sustainer of the world. The word "personal" here just means a spiritual, if not a physical, person.

Sevak: Good to remind us of the meaning of the word "personal" in this context, Madhyama. People are often confused and are misled here, thinking that belief in God is a personal matter. We are not talking about a personal belief here. We are rather talking about God as a person, in this context.

Madhyama: Now, an on-the-face observation of Hinduism may see Hinduism as confusingly all these, namely, monotheism or belief in one God, polytheism or belief in many gods, pantheism or belief that everything is divine and panentheism or belief that God covers the whole world and stretches far beyond.

Sanatan: Madhyama, I think Hinduism basically accepts the divine as both within and beyond us and the world. The famous Purusha hymn of the *Rig-veda* says of the cosmic person *padosya sarva bhutani tri-pad asyamritam divi,* meaning that just one quarter of him is all the beings and three quarters go beyond. God is, so to say, both transcendent and immanent.

Madhyama: I agree, Sanatan. Although the one basically ineffable infinite being of Hinduism may seem to embrace monotheism, polytheism and pantheism in many a confusing way to unattending eyes, the scripture very clearly supports the panentheistic theme you spoke of.

Darshana: Madhyama, you covered the major forms of beliefs in world religions in relation to God of one kind or another. There is an important form of belief in Hinduism, though, which we should expressly include here. It is more philosophical than religious but no less spiritual.

Madhyama: Yes, Darshana, indeed it is very important. I will call it spiritual monism, which states that there is one spiritual being behind the universe, supporting and pervading the universe, if not creating it as an architect. The most prominent spiritual philosophy in Hinduism, namely Vedanta, and especially Advaita or non-dualist Vedanta, is basically a form of spiritual monism.

Navin: Madhyama, I appreciate you going over the different belief forms that are possible as well as actually prevalent in the history of religions in the world. This helps us to place Hinduism of our conception or, rather, Hinduism of the Hindu conception, in the religious and spiritual map of the world. I see clearly now how Hinduism should not be confused with pantheism and polytheism as it has often been, especially by non-Hindus with a superficial if not prejudiced eye. It is clearly akin to panentheism and spiritual monism, with a conspicuous tinge of monotheism. Did I get this right, Sevakji?

Sevak: You did, Navin. You put it clearly and succinctly. Also, it can be stated forthrightly that the four-fold Hindu identity as articulated by Madhyama makes Hinduism to stand out very clearly and distinctly from all other religions of the world history. Surely, many religions exhibit one or more of the four features but no other religion embodies all the four principles. Hence, Madhyama's moderate Hinduism stands out fundamentally as a unique religious image and spiritual vision in the world picture. It is also comprehensive in that it does not leave out anything that is widely essential in Hindu beliefs and practices as a whole. It is good historically too, such as whatever history is actually important to Hinduism. But I know that Madhyama has more to tell us about moderate Hinduism.

Madhyama: Yes, Sevakji. The four-fold Hinduism is central to my moderate Hinduism but I do want and need to add considerable detail to make it more complete. And I want to start with a succinct statement of moderate but essential Hinduism in just one hundred words.

Mahila: A good round number, Madhyama. I like that. Hinduism for Today in one hundred words!

Madhyama: Here it is, in one hundred words: "Hinduism is based on four principles: One spiritual being, many ways to speak about it, many ways to reach it and the Karmic law of moral accountability. *Manu-smriti* asks all humans to cultivate fortitude, forgiveness, temperance, not stealing,

purity, sense control, reason, learning, truth and control of anger. Hinduism recognizes four aims of life for all human beings: physical needs, social values, moral fulfillment and spiritual freedom. Highest spiritual experience can be reached through paths of selfless action, love of God, knowledge and meditation. Ultimate spiritual being is both within and beyond, imbibing infinite existence, pure consciousness and deepest bliss."

How about it, folks? Of course, this can be and must be expanded into a more fully featured form.

Sevak: This is a significant moment for us. Madhyama has come up with something that is made to take us beyond our work on defining or describing Hinduism toward Hinduism for Today that we want to project. I'd like everyone to take turn commenting on Madhyama's one-hundred-word formulation of Hinduism.

Darshana: That's a good idea. Who wants to go first?

Anish: Let me go first. I am the youngest of us all. Let the more mature among us comment later with their presumably more matured wisdom.

Obviously, Madhyama has expanded her four-fold summary of Darshana's extended working description of Hinduism into a more flesh-and-blood form. She has added just enough features to cover a whole lot of Hinduism's content. The ten virtues advocated by Manu in his law book are truly universal moral values unlike the ten commandments, which incorporate a good deal of theological dogma.

Let me stop here. I can go on. But let someone else take it further. Mahila, would you like to take it away from here?

Mahila: Sure. I am impressed by Madhyama's enriched but concise formulation of Hinduism. It seems to capture the essence of Hinduism and yet do it without missing a whole lot.

Anish talked about the ten virtues recommended by Manu for all, and I repeat, truly for all humans. Sanatan gave us the forty virtues to cultivate drawing from Goyandka and Navin gave us eleven vows to keep drawing from Gandhi. Madhyama drew from the horse's mouth, that is, Manu the arch law-giver of Hinduism. Some of what Manu has said is controversial at least in the eyes of many of my feminist friends but it seems the ten universal injunctions of Manu cited here by Madhyama can hardly raise much of controversy anywhere.

I would take this thread further by pointing out the mention of the four values of life in Hinduism. I think they are very important for a

well-rounded depiction of Hinduism. They succinctly put together a total philosophy of life that includes bodily needs, social values, moral development and spiritual pursuit. Earlier we alluded to the Western values like freedom, rights, equality and justice and their influence on the East. They seem to tell us how to approach life but do not tell us what to pursue in life. We should, for example, promote individual freedom and trust the individual to pursue whatever goals of life he or she wants to. We also have to hope that the pursuit will be responsible without any abuse of the freedom granted. There is hardly any guidance as to what values are central in the pursuit of a wide range of happiness. The four values of Hindu life clearly and comprehensively lay down a wide range of goals of human effort that, together, make for a harmonious pursuit of happiness by individuals within groups with diverse orientations. All groups or societies would need to take care of the physical needs of everybody and provide basic economic avenues within an ethically responsible framework. To also mention spiritual fulfillment is the icing on the cake. Unlike most secular setups which leave out the spiritual in their superficial focus on the economic aspects at the cost of all others.

Sanskriti, would you like to take this further?

Sanskriti: Fine, Mahila. The four values of life in Hinduism cover the individual, social, ethical and spiritual goals. This is a wide spectrum of goals for everybody to reach and any society that commits itself to all of them also undertakes to encourage and provide for them through its operations. I would go for that society rather than one that, in the modern Western style, just leaves the individual to chaotically fumble around through life in a trial-and-error fashion.

I would like to take the thread further by pointing out how neatly Madhyama has articulated the four spiritual paths showing the breadth and tolerance of Hinduism in allowing spiritual pursuit for individuals according to their aptitude and inclination. I would like Sanatan to address this because I think he knows more than me on the topic of spiritual paths. Too, he knows them more deeply.

Sanatan: Thanks, Sanskriti. The *Bhagavad-gita* is widely regarded by Hindus to have opened the window of spiritual path pluralism. Hinduism does not just say that spiritual pursuit is the highest potential and most deeply satisfying goal for any human. It does not also just say that there are many paths and any path is as good as any other. It systematically articulates the four major paths, which together include a truly wide range of human aptitudes and inclinations.

It is a classical idea in Western psychology to divide the mind into three faculties of intellect, emotion and will. But it is the Hindu genius to work them out through the three major paths in spiritual cultivation. Those inclined toward intellectuality would find the path of knowledge more suitable for them. Those in whose life emotion is more functional can use the spiritual path of devotion to God more easily. Individuals who are strong activists would recognize that the path of selfless social work is more workable for them than others. These three paths use the three faculties as sort of ladders on which a spiritual aspirant climbs up to reach the peak experience to which he or she is committed. On the other hand, there also is the challenging path of meditation, which is rather a ladder-less path. A mentally well-prepared aspirant can direct his or her consciousness straight up toward the peak in a kind of high jump manner through intensive meditation techniques and practices. Madhyama has done an excellent job in hinting at all the four major paths recognized by Hinduism. Navin, do you want to take it away from here?

Navin: Yes, I would. My own spiritual inclination as a Gandhian style reformist is toward the path of selfless service work for humanity. Here I am challenged to do my committed work without getting tangled up with a penchant for outcomes. Whatever the outcomes, the point here for a reformist spiritual cultivator is to do all one can do with the best of what one can give and then be above it without trying to hit particular outcomes by hook or crook. The spirit of contribution in as selfless a manner as possible is the central feature of this path of selfless service of humanity.

I, too, commend Madhyama for an outstanding job on expanding Hinduism beyond definition toward a full philosophy of life. While Madhyama does good justice to the spiritual paths to be practiced, she does not neglect the theoretical underpinnings behind them. Darshana is far more qualified than me to offer a competent narrative about the philosophical presuppositions implied in Madhyama's hundred-word formulation.

Darshana: Thank you, Navin. Madhyama has succeeded in articulating the complete philosophy of life that Hinduism incorporates and tries to inculcate in all, helping them to actually live a well-rounded life and achieve all of its principal goals. The diversity, tolerance and pluralism offered by Hinduism are not just slogans or platitudes in Hinduism. Contemporary Western philosophizing involves much dogmatic assertion of the value of relativism, diversity and pluralism without trying to find a

metaphysically solid framework to make the value palpable. The value then has to remain hanging in the sky, so to say, because any attempt to ground it is regarded as involved in absolutist metaphysics.

Hinduism resolves the dilemma and has done it through centuries, or even millennia, of tradition. Its absolute is a being with plastic, flexible and open-ended reality. Madhyama has included this salient feature of Hinduism in her hundred-word formulation very beautifully, though you have to dig deep into the hundred words to see and gather it.

Madhyama: Darshana, can you please explain this in some detail? I feel there is something important for me to learn here. I may have sailed into this salient feature of Hinduism inadvertently. I need, in that case, to acquaint myself with it more intimately.

Darshana: Madhyama, I think it is sitting clearly and securely in the back of your mind. Hinduism does not have to consciously articulate it in Western style philosophizing in order to reap its benefits. Of course the Western style of conscious formulation in response to a deeply felt intellectual puzzle has the great merit of working the mind through a clear intellectual path. So, I am not at all criticizing Western style philosophizing here. In fact, it is to the credit of Western method of philosophy that a beauteous merit of Hindu thought comes out in the open. But let me focus on the salient Hindu metaphysics that makes possible what may seem to be an innovative solution.

The concept of ultimate reality in Hinduism is embedded in a form of spiritual monism as we have seen just a while ago. At least this is prominently and vocally affixed in the non-dualist philosophy called *advaita vedanta* in Hinduism. There are philosophies in Hinduism that diverge from *advaita* and *advaita* or non-dualism itself has tried to justify its spiritual monism in a variety of ways some of which are housed as responses to Western philosophy ranging over Plato, Kant and Hegel, for example. But I am concerned here with the unique way in which Hinduism can be seen as an original and viable approach to a basic problem in contemporary analytic philosophy in the West. The problem is the tangle between realism and relativism. Very briefly, realism involves a commitment to an inflexible absolutist dogmatism, while relativism implies a murky evasion of any grounding in reality.

Sevak: Darshana, I am not sure the group is prepared to comprehend the subtlety of your philosophical explanations. May be an example will help.

Darshana: Sorry, Sevakji. I got carried away in my conceptual flow. Let's take an example from religion. Look at the commandment "Thou shalt not kill." Now, if not killing is an absolute value grounded in a real God who lays it down for all of us to be observed in all circumstances, we cannot make any exceptions to it, such as killing in self-defense, or killing caused by insanity, an unintentional accidental killing, or killing an enemy in war, or abortion or capital punishment, It is possible to make God look cruel and counter-intuitive or even immoral if taken to the letter in his injunction of not killing. Now, if you substitute God with reason, conscience, duty, moral dictum or the like, the result is the same.

Anish: I was just going to criticize the example by suggesting a substitute for God. But you took it away from my mind, Darshana. I now see the point in its truly wide sweep.

Darshana: Yes, the problem goes beyond religion and even beyond morality. It goes into what may be regarded as real or true. The point is completed by looking at what may happen if we relax the commandment not to kill and allow exceptions by introducing rules such as a killing in self-defense is not killing, abortion is not killing in certain circumstances, and so on. We might even introduce cultural diversity and say that certain kind of killing may be allowed in certain cultures but not in others. Finally, the whole matter may trickle down to any individual thinking about killing at any particular moment one way and at another moment another way. Now we have lost the rule or commandment completely. We will then doubt whether there is anything like real morality if relativism of one sort is allowed and it trickles down to drown the whole of the meaning of any rule giving us morality or even truth and reality.

Sanskriti: I never thought morality or even truth can be so easily endangered. We would face an unmanageable chaos if relativism is allowed to rule and won't be able to decide on the truth of anything. And if we do not allow openness of any kind, we would be locked into a boxed rule, which may look arbitrary or erratic in certain circumstances. How can you get us out of this dilemma, Darshana?

Darshana: Lots and lots of debate and argument have failed to resolve the issue in contemporary analytic philosophy. One interesting and original way, though, is shown by Hinduism and it is built into Madhyama's formulation.

Madhyama: Wow, and I am not even aware of it! Tell me about it, Darshana.

Darshana: Hinduism projects and vouches for the experience of the one spiritual being behind the universe. This being is ultimately ineffable and is described as *neti, neti*, meaning "not this, not that." This obtains because of its being infinite, stretching everywhere within the world and far beyond. Remember that we described Hinduism as panentheistic a while ago. Now, see that Madhyama's hundred word formulation points out that the one spiritual being can be, albeit partly, described in many ways and can also be reached through many paths. This opens the window for diversity, pluralism, flexibility, openness and tolerance and prevents it from becoming a suffocating box for human affairs to operate.

This is not a definite and totally logical end of the dilemma in the problem between relativism and realism. But in face of there being no other good or more advantageous solutions to the problem, this is not at all a bad approach, given the nature of competition and comparison in terms of alternatives. Rather than taking realism or relativism to be the sole truth, one can be a good Hindu and have the best or at least a good measure of both. If anyone attacks it as illogical, ask him or her to produce something more logical to replace it.

Anish: I was impressed with Madhyama's hundred words on Hinduism. Now, Darshana has given me a big impossible problem and a novel solution to it from Hinduism. Looks like women will one day take it over from men!

Mahila: It's about time, Anish. Watch out, all you men!

Darshana: Indeed; we have a dream! But I want to suggest a change in Madhyama's articulation. Would it be possible, Madhyama, to introduce an explicit reference to the basic ineffability of the foundational spiritual being? That would clearly bring out the unique contribution of Hinduism toward an innovative easing, if not definitively solving, the realism-relativism problem.

Madhyama: How about reading "Ultimate spiritual being is ineffable, within and beyond" in place of "Ultimate spiritual being is both within and beyond"?

Darshana: That will work, Madhyama. I won't fuss any more with your statement.

Madhyama: No, Darshana, this is a distinct improvement. Thank you for the suggestion.

Darshana: Let me reiterate the realism-relativism issue from the other side too. We started with a realist example like the commandment of not taking life and saw how relativism infiltrated the matter and raised a dilemma. The same dilemma can be reached by starting with a relativist example such as one culture practicing monogamy, another polygamy and yet another polyandry. If we now say that all three practices are equally valid and moral truth about marriage is only relative, we will leave open the question as to where exactly we ground the truth of relativism itself. To say that relativism is true and absolutism about the issue is false is to assert relativism to be absolutely true and absolutism to be absolutely false. This does not look like a very happy situation. Conservatives like Sanatan are likely to find themselves in the camp of realism more often and reformists like Navin may find relativism more appealing.

Sanatan: Going back in my past thinking I do find myself often engaging in argument to support absolutism of Hindu values. How about you, Navin?

Navin: When I look back on my thought record, I do find that I frequently argue about the relativity of values in order to justify my reform proposals. Now I see the problem as to how am I to justify the proposed reform as absolutely superior. Philosophically, there seems to be a problem. I need relativism to dislodge the conservative position and I need absolutism to establish the suggested reform. May be we should pursue this with Darshana some time later, Sanatan?

Sanatan: Yes, I would like to clear the air here and get to the bottom of the matter.

Darshana: I will be happy to work with you two on this, for I may get some philosophical insights through our discussions.

However, my point was that a hasty relativism often does not realize that its truth is of an absolutist ilk and needs a ground that can only be reality show, so to say. We already saw that realism without much thought behind it lands in practice in the company of all forms of relativist exceptions. As far as religion is concerned, the matter is likely to end up as an argument between God-given absolutism and man-made relativism.

The last feature of Madhyama's hundred-word articulation of Hinduism I would like to address in our current thread of discussion is the triple nature of the spiritual being. I am referring to existence, awareness and bliss as its constituents. I want to invite Sevakji to take up the thread over there.

Sevak: Thank you, Darshana for helping us with some philosophical issues involved in the matter and very insightfully enlightening us about a salient Hindu approach to the realism-relativism problem. Before I take up the topic of the triple nature of the cosmic Hindu being, I want to explicate a corollary to what you have been saying.

To say that the ineffable spiritual being underlying the universe is both immanent and transcendent, that is both within and beyond the world, is likely to be accused of a self-contradiction by those who take opposing sides on the issue between immanentism and transcendentalism. Immanentists often think that there is no God beyond the universe. Often they end up as pantheists. Transcendentalists, on the contrary, assert that infinite God cannot be contained anywhere inside the finite world and hence must always be beyond the perceptible universe. So, the issue is forced by saying that God as supreme being is either one with us, leading to spiritual monism, or beyond and different from us, leading to theistic dualism between infinite creator and finite creatures. The peak experience of spiritual monists is described in terms of a serene self-realization, while the peak experience of theistic dualists comes in the form of God-realization where an infinite God overwhelms and dwarfs the mere mortal souls.

Now, Madhyama's moderate Hinduism envisages the ultimate being as ineffable, primarily on account of its infinite nature. Can we not construct this fundamental ineffability as the prime locus of the peak spiritual experience of both dualists and non-dualists and infer that both the dualist and the non-dualist are describing the same ineffable experience in different languages, one in the dualist language and the other in the non-dualist language? If we can, it may make Madhyama's moderate Hinduism into a bridge between dualism and non-dualism within Hinduism. The two have warred with each other within Hinduism for quite a while and their battle has shown no signs of true reconciliation. If this way of integrating the two can be seen as a reconciling bridge between the two, our Hinduism for Today would serve a very constructive purpose of establishing peace between two restive parties.

Darshana: Sevakji, it would seem that this has the potential to be a significant piece of constructive contribution. Whether the synthesis you propose will be actually accepted by the warring parties is another matter. Each party has a long history of seeking to establish its own superiority or primacy. Your solution is both logical and democratic. It also coheres with the nature of peak spiritual experience described by both parties. But I have often found that being rational and reasonable, as you clearly are, is not enough to get actually accepted in the real world. But this of course is another matter. We are basically concerned with the theoretical soundness of your proposal and I do not see much to quarrel with on logical or philosophical grounds. From the viewpoint of spiritual experience too it seems to me that you are doing adequate justice to both sides.

I do have an observation, though, that does not do harm to your central argument or position. But it points out a complexity in the matter that I am sure you are aware of.

Sevak: Darshana, thank you for your generous and straightforward commentary. I believe the complexity you are talking about pertains to the two sides. I ignored the complexity of each side. There indeed are many forms of spiritual non-dualism on the one side and those of theistic dualism on the other. I was also trying to restrict the matter to Hinduism, while the issue between immanentism and transcendentalism or monism and dualism infects the entire large picture of religions of the world as a whole.

But you are right on both counts. The two languages of dualism and non-dualism can be expanded into a plurality of languages without affecting the argument from ineffability. The ineffable spiritual being serves as a deceptively simple source or ground that can give rise to the two basically divergent languages or expression styles. As far as Hinduism is concerned, though, the ground is also secured empirically, for Hinduism unequivocally affirms and advocates the actual experience of its final spiritual goal. It has never held that mere belief in a divine ultimate is emancipatory. In any case, you are right that the argument from ineffability is not affected by the nature or number of divergent languages, as long as the languages are involved in expressing a spiritual ultimate.

You are also right on the issue of the acceptance potential of a position on the basis of its rationality or reasonability. In fact we are engaged in constructing this entire architectonic of Hinduism for Today well aware of the fact that its mere proposal, however well we make it rational and reasonable, is not sufficient for its acceptance either within

the Hindu community or beyond. Much politics, ideology and group dynamics is involved, not to speak of the large egos of petty-minded leaders, which may be beyond our reach as just participants in this discourse. Not that we are content being the creators or authors of this expression. But the basic point presently is to achieve the expression as best we can. At this point we will leave the practical implementation effort as a separate matter. It is distressing that authors of many half-baked and platitudinal syntheses rush to propagate their constructs without seeing the need to make them clear, cogent and credible. We do not want to join them.

At any rate, we would be ill advised to make truth-compromising adjustments to win acceptance. Let us do our job first with best intentions and best efforts, trusting that it all will result in some good. We make our contribution through this expression and will go from there, seizing any opportunity to improve our results and implement them toward practical ends.

Madhyama: Well, we have intently listened to you two, Sevakji and Darshana, and benefitted from your exchange. Yes, we are engaged in a theoretical construction at the moment and want to do good justice to it for now. We might cross the bridge of improvement, application and implementation when we get there. Does everybody agree?

All: Yes.

Darshana: Let us go back to our original thread where we are going round to generate internal criticism for improving Madhyama's hundred-word proposal on Hinduism. I want to bring Sevakji back to commenting on the triple nature of the one spiritual being in Madhyama's proposal.

Sevak: Yes, let me comment on the threefold nature of the ultimate spiritual reality. We have previously explored this matter in the context of defining Hinduism. In the present context we need to dispense with the expected criticism that the ultimate cannot be both ineffable and describable in three predicates. Well, the prime reason of the ineffability is its infinity that overwhelms the spiritually adept who has risen to the level of experiencing it. Since the universe we routinely perceive is stupendously vast and wondrous, its ultimate source or ground would no less be so. There are three major distinct aspects to our universe conceived in widest possible terms. Three of the widest possible

categories we can come up with regarding our universe are existence, awareness and fulfillment.

It is not difficult to see the vastness of these three fundamental categories of our life and experience. While existence covers the whole realm of being and reality, awareness extends over the entire realm of knowledge and consciousness and fulfillment ranges over all that can satisfy our being and function. Thus the triumvirate covers the metaphysical, epistemological, psychological, ethical and aesthetic dimensions of human concerns. One dimension of a wide range that may seem to be left out is the dimension of logic. May I dare say that awareness would include this dimension?

Darshana: Sevakji, I probably know what you are driving at, but I want to see you articulate it.

Sevak: Darshana, I will try but if I come up short on philosophical grounds, I would like to know whether I am beyond all help.

Darshana: I will let you know, Sevakji.

Sevak: I have a hard time realizing how logic, being logical, doing logic, together with reaching logical validity and soundness are possible without awareness. If logical truth cannot, therefore, exist without awareness, then the dimension of awareness should cover the dimension of logic. I am at your mercy now, Darshana.

Darshana: There are arguments both for and against the position that logical truth depends on some sort of mind in order for it to exist. For example, admitting that one of the most important parts of logic, namely, the law of non-contradiction, can hardly be grasped by any non-thinking entity, when anyone actually grasps it, it does not appear to be invented but only discovered. Then, where was it before it was discovered? So, there is room to infer that it exists somehow somewhere before anybody actually discovers it. So, Sevakji, I will give you a benefit of doubt.

Sevak: Thank you for being so gracious, Darshana.

Darshana: Sevakji, I think this was fun for both of us. I hope others enjoyed this little excursion in philosophy.

Madhyama: For us it was fun being curiously uncertain how it was going to turn out.

Sanskriti: I had not trusted philosophy before, just thoughtlessly surmising that it was a sort of trickery that can make any view look good or bad as a philosopher wishes. I am now getting a clearer picture, thanks to Darshana's on-the-spot philosophizing.

Anish: I concur, except that I have to pay very close attention when Darshana starts philosophizing. It sort of challenges my intellect and defies my identity. I think I was being cowardly when I tried to resist philosophy. Now I force myself to listen carefully and I am able to get my teeth into it.

Mahila: Anish, you should feel proud of yourself now. We are in the same boat.

Sanatan: I am somewhat familiar with Hindu systems of philosophy. But the sort of logic Darshana gets us into is sharp and quite different, comes as it does from the perspective of Western philosophy. May be I would benefit more by reading an introductory text recommended by Darshana.

Navin: I was just going to ask Darshana if she would recommend such text or give us a crash course in philosophy.

Darshana: Hey, I will be happy to give you a dose of philosophy till you are ready to serve me my own bitter medicine!

Sevak: Darshana has made me read a few works on philosophy but it has not yet raised me to the level of confidence I hoped for. May be one of these days I will get where I hope to.

Darshana: Sevakji, you are underestimating your philosophical abilities.

Sevak: Well, where are we in the thread?

Madhyama: Sevakji, I have kept track of the thread. You were trying to show that existence, awareness and fulfillment are some of the major widest categories of human life, thought and experience.

Sevak: Oh, yes. To summarize, I was saying that the ineffability of the ultimate spiritual being so eminently held to be experiential in Hinduism for anyone willing to follow any of the major spiritual paths is basically due to its infinite nature. I trace the infinity of this one being to three of

the widest human categories, namely, existence, awareness and fulfillment.

Sanatan: Please let us not forget that the ineffability is proclaimed in the *Upanishads* as *neti neti* and the triple nature of the ultimate spiritual being is described there as *sat, chit* and *ananda*. We are firmly rooted in the Hindu scriptures on this.

Sevak: Certainly, Sanatan. An important point I want to drive home is that the being is one with these three so that we can say that it is pure, infinite, ultimate and intimate existence, pure, infinite, ultimate and intimate awareness and pure, infinite, ultimate and intimate fulfillment at the same time. Given this it represents the terminal acme of human potential and aspirations. There indeed cannot be anything even conceivably higher or deeper than it. By definition it is the highest or deepest, whichever metaphor you want to use. Having conceived it, let alone having achieved it, if one can think of anything higher or deeper, he or she has not properly conceived it.

This is not just to build up or inflate the glory of this being, called *Brahman* by Hindu sages. Hinduism does not, should not and cannot claim any sort of monopoly on it. It is indeed available to anyone who dares to pursue it on any of the spiritual paths recommended. In this sense it is truly universal, undiminished by having to believe in a particular saint, prophet or authority. Its proof is fundamentally in its experience and not in a conceptual belief however attractively packaged in flowery rhetoric. As such, it very well deserves to be the centerpiece of moderate Hinduism and of Hinduism for Today. Madhyama's formulation gives us a clear and succinct concept of it. I highly commend Madhyama and her efforts toward a fine achievement of our objective in this seminar on the philosophy of Hindu thought and spirituality.

We are approaching the end of today's session. Usually Madhyama gives us a summary of our session highlights at the end. Darshana, would you like to attempt a summary this time, since Madhyama happens to be the presenter today?

Darshana: Surely, I will try and I will be really brief. Madhyama's presentation started off with a very clear enunciation of five goals of her project. It went on to present five criteria to satisfy, proceeding from a distinctive fourfold working description of Hinduism. The five criteria were comprehensiveness, coherence, building on Madhyama's four-part

definition of Hinduism and the four classical values of Hindu life. Being clear, positive and constructive were also mentioned as points of method.

Madhyama then took us into a systematic caricature of what Hindu identity should be like. A consideration and discussion had us engaged in a critical look at some major prevalent ways of conceiving the Hindu identity on the part of thinkers outside Hinduism. This was followed by a close consideration of three traditional ways of looking at the Hindu identity. Madhyama mentioned and applied four criteria to formulate Hindu identity: positiveness, inclusiveness, being indigenous and distinctiveness. This was developed into four central features of Hindu identity which, incidentally, emanated from our condensed definition of Hinduism.

At the end, after a discussion of different views of God in world religions, Madhyama led into a hundred-word succinct statement that made a concise but also precise proposal for a constructive form of moderate Hinduism. We all commented upon the proposal from our diverse perspectives. A discussion ensued on the realism-relativism issue, leading to a slight modification on the nature of the ultimate spiritual being. End of the session had all of us feel quite confident that Madhyama's hundred-word statement can be an optimal basis for the Hinduism for Today that we aim to achieve in this seminar or discourse.

Is this a good summary of what has happened at this session, Madhyama?

Madhyama: It certainly is, Darshana.

Sevak: I know Madhyama has more to present. Her moderate Hinduism is fittingly an optimal centerpiece for the picture of Hinduism for Today that we have set as our goal. So, for the next session, let us have Madhyama make the rest of her presentation. At the same time, she may want to work further on what she already prepared, in light of the comments received from all of us. How do you feel, Madhyama?

Madhyama: You took words out of my mouth, Sevakji. I was just thinking of adjusting the rest of my presentation in view of the various comments, mostly generous, that I have heard so far from each of us. Thank you all for the comments. I will work on all the comments and will aim at starting next time with an expanded statement of a systematic outline of what I will call the foundations of Hinduism. Does this make sense?

Darshana: Madhyama, we can't have asked for more from you. You have done an extraordinary job.

Sevak: Indeed. Thank you, Madhyama, for a truly fine job on the central theme of our discourse. Thanks to all of you, too, for very enlightening and encouraging comments on Madhyama's proposal. I look forward to the next session where Madhyama will carry her proposal further toward an expanded systematic statement on the foundations of Hinduism.

Namas-te, everybody!

All: *Namas-te*, Sevakji.

SESSION 8:

SECURING MODERATE HINDUISM

Sevak: *Om Tat Sat*, everybody.

All: *Om Tat Sat*, Sevakji.

Sevak: Welcome back. This is our eighth session. As you know, we have covered considerable ground toward formulating and articulating Hinduism for Today, avoiding politics-related matters and focusing on intellectual and spiritual terrain. Our commitment to Hinduism is sincere and deep. Yet it is far from blind or zealous. We are not oblivious to areas where Hinduism may stand improvement. We surely want to preserve the best in Hinduism that has stood the test of time and is still sound, positive and relevant. We want as well to modify or adjust the little unsavory that has infiltrated or tainted Hinduism over centuries of travails. To this end we are engaged in a careful enunciation and assessment of the major features of Hinduism.

Sanskriti: Sevakji, before we go further I would like to hear a brief, very brief indeed, summary of what we have done so far in this seminar or discourse on Hindu thought and spirituality.

But wait a moment. Before you do that, I want to say we are here seeking to strike a level that is useful to a thoughtful contemporary individual who has more than a casual interest in Hinduism. We do not want to address Hindu philosophy at a very abstract and abstruse level just for the glossy elite. At the same time, we have no desire to pile empty platitudes or deliver vague promises and accolades of selected aspects of Hinduism. We want to be accurate and representative without being literal or pedantic. We are articulate and careful in our formulations without a desire to offend any individual or group. At the same time we do not let anything inane be hurled in our direction.

Our commitment to Hinduism is earnest and spirited. We assert our right to it and are here to vindicate it with a strong and logically sound narrative. We are not going to be hostile to Hinduism for the sake of pedantic neutrality but we are not going to pamper or pander either. We ask tough questions and pursue them assiduously. We do not want to leave Hinduism in a narrative that is clearly vulnerable. We address criticisms that we can anticipate or have already been directed toward Hinduism. As to unanticipated criticisms we will respond to them,

rejecting stereotypical inanities but learning from fair, reasonable and constructive suggestions.

May be this is a rather spirited outburst on my part but I wanted to lay it down to clarify our approach and methodology not only as I see it but also as the group sees it, in my view. Sevakji should correct me if I have strayed from our mission in any way.

Sanatan: Excuse me for jumping in. Your defiant spirit is infectious, Sanskriti. We do not always get to see your spirited side. I will respect Sevakji's judgment on whether you have strayed but, looking at the substance of what you've said, I do not see that you have strayed. You are right that we seek to avoid flashy rhetoric and concentrate on substance that can be intellectually sustained. We also do not take anything for granted, from without Hinduism and even from within. We answer even inane criticism, however clothed it may be in flowery rhetoric or putative rationality. There is no dearth of so-called criticisms of Hinduism that have made their home in the contemporary world culture and that go without much intellectual opposition sometimes because of Hindu tolerant lethargy.

It is time for Hinduism to rise above a lethargic tolerance that has not served a worthwhile purpose. The good intent behind Hindu tolerance ought to find reciprocation but has failed to do so. It has instead made Hinduism look weak and vulnerable. However, our response in this seminar is not just reactive and sentimental. We firmly reject the frequent but mindlessly hurled charge of Hindu apologetics. Ours is not an apology, ours is a constructive presentation of Hinduism and implies a critical assessment of alternatives. We want to engage Hindus as well as others in a dialog to present and assess Hinduism properly. We expect no less than an equally well thought out response and certainly not just the usual thoughtless rhetoric that deserves no more than a quick dismissal.

In a way, our challenge to the Hindu and non-Hindu world is simple. Think about what we are saying. Present alternatives that can compete. Show how we can do better within the parameters we have set to accomplish our task. We will carefully listen to all thoughtful and constructive criticism. We seek to learn from it and will respond with adjustments and modifications if necessary and with counters if appropriate.

Sevak: I deeply appreciate the statements of Sanskriti and Sanatan. Both expressed themselves in a spirited way but, contrary to appearances, they embody an important concern that Hinduism for Today must exhibit.

For historical and other reasons Hinduism indeed has suffered a step-motherly treatment from all sorts of seemingly intellectual or even purportedly spiritual directions. As a consequence it has not found the respect that it deserves in the comparative light of other faiths and their philosophies. I am sure Darshana will avow that much of what finds intellectual assent in the philosophic and cognate intellectual culture presently is often rhetoric in an intellectual garb which, kind of, "sells" more on account of its hidden political agenda than its intellectual strength.

Darshana: Indeed, more than enough is just such rhetoric! But, go on, Sevakji.

Sevak: Thanks, Darshana. The point is that in this forum we will not cater to or pander to this idiom, style or fashion of intellectual culture but will focus on direct and straightforward intellectual examination and articulation of Hinduism. We will then let it stand on its own feet. We heartily welcome constructive criticisms from all perspectives. If we need to learn and modify our position in their light, we will do so. If we find them unacceptable, we will present the reasons to support the positions we take. We will do all this with all the clarity and transparency we can summon, shunning needless rhetoric. Within Hinduism, we would like to hear about better ways of constructing the philosophy of Hindu thought and spirituality. Outside Hinduism, we would like to hear about better alternatives both in religion and in philosophy that are stronger or sounder. Our challenge is that our philosophy of Hindu thought and spirituality that we have constructed has as good an intrinsic merit and value as any alternative inside or outside the Hindu fold anywhere in the world history of humanity. We invite anyone and everyone to prove us wrong on this.

Mahila: Possibly I may be the one in this assembly that some may hope or expect to speak up, holding a brief for politicized intellectuality that feminism, postmodernism, Marxism, ecological thought and the like, including even the much-maligned modernity, have occasionally exhibited. In fact, I moved away from more radical feminist colleagues and a prime reason was politicizing of intellect. While the politicizing leads to some solidarity within the group, overall it contributes negatively by fostering isolation and separation from the larger humanity.

Darshana: Besides, there is no reason to look intellectual while aiming politically. The whole attempt is less than honest and runs counter to the tradition of plain vanilla rationality. If you criticize logic as logocentrism, do not then try to appear logical.

Sanatan: That's a great point, Darshana. But, Mahila, I am glad you see it the way you put it. Can I expect you to join us conservatives, though?

Mahila: I am afraid to go that far, Sanatan!

Darshana: We all change and I am glad to see the change that Mahila had the courage to embrace. I commend and applaud her for that. Not many women have the intellectual integrity to muster that.

Madhyama: Of course I support the more open-minded and moderate movements of thought. In this light, I admire Mahila's intellectual vision and its breadth. But, hey, you know something? I have unfinished business and am the one who is supposed to lead today's session.

Sevak: Not only that. It's an important session and potentially a culmination of our efforts so far. Madhyama, please go ahead with your presentation.

Madhyama: I sought and got the help and support I asked for. I want to thank Sevakji and Darshana in particular and everyone else here as well for holding discussions with me that helped me formulate and articulate the moderate Hinduism that now seems to me to be what Hinduism should be today.

Darshana: I think Sevakji will agree with me that Madhyama is being quite modest and generous. From my discussions with her on the points of her presentation, I have come out with the greatest respect for her integrity, vision, depth and acuity. I am looking forward to her presentation.

Sevak: I readily agree. Madhyama, it seems to me, has envisaged a remarkable form of moderate Hinduism, taking us decidedly far in the direction of our final goal of constructing a Hinduism that can stand scrutiny and be relevant to life for a long time to come. Madhyama, get us started.

Madhyama: I want to request all of you to not refrain from making the points, which you did in conversations with me. For, many of them contributed greatly to the ultimate formulation of my moderate Hinduism. I'd like them presented to the whole group so that we can discuss them. Down further, I also want us to examine and enrich or modify my formulation to make it more rational and representative.

Darshana: We'll do that, Madhyama.

Sanskriti: Just a little interjection, Madhyama. At the outset, I asked Sevakji for a very concise recount of what we have done so far in the seminar meetings. At this point I will not insist on it any more. Let us go further. We can have a recount any time later.

Madhyama: Thank you, Sanskriti. Folks, recall my hundred-word snapshot of Hinduism at the last session. Let me begin with a slightly modified snapshot of Hinduism, which I will call "Hinduism in 108 Words." I got the idea from Sanatan who told me of the significance of the number 108 in the Hindu tradition.

Anish: I have often heard the number 108 being passed around and regarded as having esoteric qualities. I would like to hear from Sanatan something more articulate and enlightening about it.

Navin: Exactly. I've heard quite a bit about the mystical significance of that number. But I am sure Sanatan can satisfy my curiosity about it better than anyone I can think of.

Sanatan: Everyone knows about the twelve signs of the zodiac. But not as many know about the twenty-seven constellations of the zodiac. These were more prevalent during the Vedic times. The Vedic sages divided the zodiac and, by implication, the entire universe in twenty-seven equal segments. The full circle of the universe would be 360 degrees and dividing the circle by twenty-seven yields a segment of thirteen degrees and twenty minutes.

Sanskriti: Are these segments or constellations the ones that are called *nakshatras*, Sanatan?

Sanatan: Precisely, Sanskriti. Each is visualized as a cluster of stars or galaxies with a familiar shape or form. Each is given a specific name also. I won't take you into the detailed significance of these names and

the astronomical observations associated with them. The point to ponder is that together the twenty-seven *nakshatras* represent the span and measure of the total universe in which we live. Thus the twenty-seven constellations in their totality, making for the 360 degrees of the circle, signify the vast extent and completeness of world picture.

Obviously, we are not thinking here only of the visible stars or star clusters by which the constellations are named, for we are talking about the vast space extended in all directions from our vantage point of observation. All space and its contents are encompassed through the twenty-seven directions and their infinite extensions, beyond anything that our best telescopes can penetrate.

Anish: Don't the twelve signs or *rashis* do the same too, Sanatan?

Sanatan: Indeed they do, Anish. It is alleged that the Hindus got the twelve signs from the Greeks. However, the Western signs are extensions of the Earth's equator and are joined to the seasons on the Earth. For this reason they are more terrestrial than celestial. The Western zodiac comprising these earthly signs is called tropical zodiac, which moves as a function of the Earth's motion around the Sun.

Sanskriti: Forgive me for what may be a silly question. How can a zodiac move? Isn't it supposed to represent the whole universe? Yes, the planets move and even the Sun moves around the galactic center of the Milky Way. We know that the universe is expanding but that motion is uniform from all points within the universe so that no motion is felt anywhere. But how can the whole thing, the universe, be moving on the lines of the zodiac?

Anish: Sanskriti, you have asked a legitimate and not a silly question. Astronomers and other related scientists have severely criticized this Western notion of a moving zodiac as an absurdity for the reason that you point out. What Sanatan is referring to is called the sidereal zodiac, which is fixed with the universe along with the star systems and is not vulnerable to these criticisms. So, Sanatan, are you saying that the Vedic zodiac is sidereal?

Sanatan: Exactly, Anish. The twenty-seven constellations can all be seen as actual star clusters in the sky. They are not imaginary points of geological extensions as the Western tropical zodiac is, which keeps moving and thus losing reference to the stars.

The point is that the Vedic or Hindu zodiac, consisting of the twenty-seven segments of equal magnitude, is meant to and does in fact span the entire universe. Now, every *nakshatra* is divided into four equal quarters called *navamshas* or *navamamshas* of three degrees and twenty minutes each.

Anish: I got it. It's beautiful. Twenty-seven multiplied by four is 108. This comprises the entire universe and so it is that 108 is the complete number.

Navin: This resolves the whole esoteric mystery for me. So, symbolically, 108 beads in the Hindu holy rosary serves as a constant reminder that reciting a mantra 108 times means and implies spiritually traversing the entire universe. Nothing whatsoever is excluded. It is inclusivism par excellence, acknowledging and accepting every corner of the universe. So characteristic of Hinduism. Well done, Sanatan.

Sanatan: Thank you. On to Madhyama's "Hinduism in 108 Words."

Madhyama: Let me jump right into it. Here are the 108 words: "Hindu religion, called Sanatana Dharma, is based on four principles: Karmic law of moral accountability, one spiritual being, many ways to speak about it and many ways to reach it. *Manu-smriti* asks all humans to cultivate fortitude, forgiveness, temperance, not stealing, purity, sense control, reason, learning, truth and control of anger. Hinduism recognizes four aims of life for all human beings: physical needs, social values, moral fulfillment and spiritual freedom. Highest spiritual experience can be reached through paths of selfless action, love of God, knowledge and meditation. Ultimate spiritual being is ineffable, within and beyond, imbibing infinite existence, pure consciousness and deepest bliss. May everyone attain the highest!"

That's all, folks! We had a discussion on the bulk of this snapshot the last time we met. Before I go to the next stage of presenting a more fully-featured architectonic of moderate Hinduism or Hinduism for Today, I would like to invite more comments or discussion.

Anish: Excellent in all-round wisdom, with concise, precise and tightly woven concepts. Also, amazingly comprehensive. This is a gem, Madhyama. Congratulations on this remarkable achievement.

Well, I will not be all praise. You did mention personal God once! But I won't fuss or quibble about it. You cannot have everything. It's good that personal God was limited to just one mention. The list of

virtues to be cultivated by all human beings is great in that it is truly secular and universal. That Manu came out with it just seals it with traditional authenticity. The mention of reason as one of the virtues is very heartening to me.

All in all, a great piece of condensed wisdom, embodying what Hinduism is all about. If I can appreciate it, I am sure others here will feel even better!

Madhyama: Anish, thank you for not subjecting the snapshot to your youthful rebellion! I appreciate your kind words.

Can we go alphabetically for further comments?

Darshana: It's my turn, in that case. I concur with Anish for the most part. If his atheism can live with one reference to God, my philosophy can live with only one mention of reason? Just kidding. Reason does not need frequent mention, especially when we are seeking not to do merely conceptual philosophy but to include the whole panorama of life and thinking about life. Madhyama has wisely included spiritual as well as secular terms. As Anish said, the synoptic coverage is pretty vast for such a few words to capture. The words are skillfully chosen to make a highly systematic design. The fourfold definition of Hinduism at the start is something that Madhyama came up with earlier as her summary of the defining features of Hinduism that we discussed. She then went ahead to develop that piece of gem quite fully into a hundred-word articulation that is a coherent group of cognate ideas with great application to major aspects of life. This 108-word reformulation retains every bit of its predecessor's sharpness, plus a little refinement.

Where's my criticism? As a philosopher I cannot let anything go without criticism. But I will pass on this.

Madhyama: I will tell you the reason why Darshana is passing on this snapshot. It's because she had a big hand in its making. She criticized several versions that I gave her and the present version bears her intellectual stamp, having gone through a barrage of Devil's advocacy so characteristic of Darshana's philosophical acumen. Hence, thanks, again, Darshana.

Darshana: You are welcome, Madhyama. A caveat would be that Madhyama's creativity of ideas and their correlations played a big role in the final formulation of the snapshot.

Mahila: I cannot but approve and admire this wonderful piece of conceptual acuity. Should I ask to add more social activism in this snapshot? At my present juncture of life development, I personally accept the spiritual dimension of life as one of the foremost features of meaningful living. I feel Mira would be proud of this formulation except that she may see more intellectuality and complexity in it than what her simple depth of spiritual intuition would dictate. But, I won't insist on a superficial and contrived simplicity. Life is complex and Hinduism ought to represent that complexity with dexterity. And, this piece really serves that need of representation. Great job, Madhyama.

On social activism, I can live with one reference to karma yoga mentioned as the spiritual path of selfless action. Asking for more would not be selfless action on my part!

Madhyama: Thank you, Mahila. It's Navin's turn.

Navin: Am I going to pick on Hinduism mentioned as Sanatana Dharma, which is the term that is often used to describe conservative Hinduism? With Mahatma Gandhi on my back I can't! He called his Hinduism by the same term and now bound my hands on it!

I am struck by Manu's list of ten virtues. Gandhi's eleven vows are well reflected in them overall. I am pleased with the snapshot in all possible ways that have already been mentioned. Madhyama ought to be commended for this wondrous achievement.

Madhyama: Thanks, Navin. On to Sanatan.

Sanatan: With Manu and the term Sanatana Dharma getting a prime place in the snapshot, I won't be true to my name if I were to find any objection to this pithy précis! I have no problem regarding the word "sanatana" as referring to what is eternally true in religion and spirituality. I would also hold eternity to represent both timelessness and time-testedness, if I may coin the latter. As a conservative I would prefer a feature that relates to being tested in time again and again. I cannot quibble with anything in Madhyama's snapshot of Hinduism. It is all that so many of you have already described it to be. It is very accurate, faithful and representative of Hinduism as I understand it. Madhyama, I did not know you would turn up as such a great ally of traditional Hinduism! Thank you for this excellent contribution. It's going to make my day!

Madhyama: I appreciate your thoughtful assessment of the snapshot, Sanatan. Now to Sanskriti.

Sanskriti: Well, I do great deal of charity and I tried to be very charitable toward Madhyama's snapshot. I hate to be the one here that has a hard time with this gem of a concise articulation of the complex essence of Hinduism. My problem is I cannot make myself to live with no reference to art at all in the snapshot. Am I fussing too much here and should rather be content and not complain about it?

Sevak: No, Sanskriti. You are right. We did goof up. It is a patent lapse on our part. We should have explored this with you deeper. What do others think?

Darshana: I agree. This is a significant oversight. We ought to incorporate art into the snapshot in some way.

Madhyama: Thank you, indeed, Sanskriti, for pointing out a major error on our part and doing it so gently, persuasively and, as it turns out, so effectively.

Sevak: I am sure Sanskriti is not saying that a specific art should be mentioned in the snapshot. How about making room for something like the Hindu art of life?

Sanskriti: That's a beautiful idea, Sevakji. Thank you for the suggestion. Of course, I wholeheartedly agree that a specific art or even art as just one part of life is not my concern. A phrase like "the Hindu art of life" will not only serve the purpose I had in mind. It also will preserve the philosophic comprehensiveness of the snapshot.

Sevak: Let me suggest this change, then. Instead of the phrase "Hinduism recognizes four aims of life for all human beings" let us adopt the phrase "Hindu art of life comprises four goals for all humans."

Anish: That's great, Sevakji. Ten words are substituted for ten words. We remain set on the number 108 perfectly.

Madhyama: Indeed. How do you like that, Sanskriti?

Sanskriti: I love it, Madhyama. We have achieved a perfection for a snapshot of Hinduism. I am rendered speechless now, for all that needs

to be said about the snapshot has already been said, with me agreeing on everything. And, the only thing I had concern about has been taken very good care of. It's time to proceed further, Madhyama.

Madhyama: Sevakji, we now await your words on the matter. Needless to say, along with Darshana, you have been a big part of the process resulting in the snapshot in its present shape. Now that you have rescued it from an obvious defect, I feel gratified already.

Sevak: Let us then leave the matter, the snapshot, right there. I don't think I have anything to add to the very perceptive thoughts already voiced so far about the snapshot. I want to congratulate Madhyama for an outstanding performance. Are you ready, Madhyama, for the next stage of your presentation?

Madhyama: Yes, Sevakji. Many thanks for being such a great source of inspiration for me and for all of us here. Without you we won't be getting anywhere that would be worth it. And, I know I am speaking here for the whole group.

Sevak: You people are very generous. Thank you. This is a wonderful group to work with. Any other group would have fallen apart with the kind of pressure through which you have been put. The sheer tenacity, good spirit and intense cooperativeness have defined this group and its workings every step of the way. Besides, the group is made up of individuals with distinct minds of their own who won't simply rubber-stamp everything. It has been a pleasure being a part of this process.

Madhyama: Great! On to the next stage of my presentation of moderate Hinduism.

Anish: Madhyama, I would like you to read the modified version of your snapshot of Hinduism before you go on to the next stage. I want to digest it fully before we go further.

Mahila: I support Anish on this. I too want to absorb it well in my system.

Madhyama: Here is the modified version of the snapshot of Hinduism that we seem to agree on currently:

"Hindu religion, called Sanatana Dharma, is based on four principles: Karmic law of moral accountability, one spiritual being, many

ways to speak about it and many ways to reach it. *Manu-smriti* asks all humans to cultivate fortitude, forgiveness, temperance, not stealing, purity, sense control, reason, learning, truth and control of anger. Hindu art of life comprises four goals for all humans: physical needs, social values, moral fulfillment and spiritual freedom. Highest spiritual experience can be reached through paths of selfless action, love of God, knowledge and meditation. Ultimate spiritual being is ineffable, within and beyond, imbibing infinite existence, pure consciousness and deepest bliss. May everyone attain the highest!"

Sanatan: Madhyama, is the discussion on the snapshot closed or is there room for some ruminations?

Madhyama: I won't close it any way. Sevakji, Darshana, what do you think?

Sevak: It would be inconsistent with our method and procedure to close discussions except perhaps temporarily to avert serious digressions. Even then I would be all for keeping them open. What are your thoughts, Darshana?

Darshana: I entirely agree. I would urge Sanatan to offer his thoughts on the snapshot.

Sanatan: Thanks, Sevakji, Darshana and Madhyama. As I absorbed the snapshot in my mind I came up with some observations. One is that the fourfold definition of Hinduism seems just right. It distinguishes Hinduism from all other religions of the world and offers a combination of principles that together is unique in the field of world religions as far as I can tell.

Secondly, Manu's ten virtues look like a good miniature reflection of Goyandka's forty and Gandhi's eleven that we discussed earlier during our consideration of conservative and reform Hinduism. Two of them that I want to mention put me to shame: forgiveness and anger control. I become impatient and confrontational at times thinking and talking about criticisms of Hinduism leveled from perspectives of other faiths. Although some of my colleagues and associates are even more guilty of this, I for my part should be more restrained, circumspect and self-critical. In any case I see it as a positive that mainstays of both my conservatism and Navin's reformism are so well embedded in the snapshot.

Madhyama: This is very generous and touching, Sanatan.

Sanatan: Thanks, Madhyama, but I am voicing my serious and sincere feelings here. And, I hope I will improve on the lines I am suggesting, though I won't guarantee that. I am human, after all, even though that is not a great excuse.

Sevak: We appreciate your feelings, Sanatan, on this. We all may share these feelings at least to some extent. Hopefully, people belonging to other faiths and having less open mind and feelings on the matter toward other religions will take a clue from Sanatan's feelings and learn something.

Anish: Their endemic exclusivism won't let them even imagine the nobility of feelings that Sanatan has shown. I have no faith in their philosophical generosity and only faint though fervent hope that they will begin to dilute their exclusivism at some point. In this I do not entirely concur with Manu, although in an interesting way that contrasts with Sanatan.

Darshana: Yes, it would be more standard or stereotypical to think Sanatan rather voicing feelings of Anish here.

Madhyama: I have a feeling Sanatan is not done with his ruminations.

Sanatan: That's right, Madhyama. Thirdly, I would like to know what Navin thinks about the way Sanskrit terms representing the four goals of life are rendered in the snapshot. Especially, the first three goals which we have not discussed as much as we have discussed the fourth and of course the highest goal, that of *moksha* rendered beautifully as "spiritual freedom."

Navin: The three to which Sanatan refers are *kama*, *artha* and *dharma* in Sanskrit. The snapshot renders them as physical needs, social values and moral fulfillment respectively. There is very creative innovation in this rendering that needs to be brought out. I have seen these terms rendered in tortured English so often that I thought no English equivalents can ever be devised. But, now that I think about the matter, these renderings look accurate and to the point. However, I want to go deeper in their import.

Sanatan: So do I, Navin. I feel good that you think of this English rendering of the three is important. I concur that it is a major breakthrough in communicating the import of the three goals which is usually mangled out of shape by atrocious terms that convey nothing of the real import and on top mislead and confuse.

Madhyama: Is this then your last rumination, Sanatan?

Sanatan: Yes, Madhyama. This is my last rumination and I offer it for some exchange of thought. Sevakji, would you like to enlighten us on this issue?

Sevak: I am glad it has caught our attention. Thanks to Sanatan for bringing it up. The four goals in the Hindu art of life have received a sort of demeaning treatment by Western as well as Hindu translators and exegetes. In the final analysis much of the blame lies with the Hindu presenters who have failed to bring out the positive in the four goals and their conceptions. It is true that the perception of these concepts has suffered consequently in terms not just of clarity but fairness as well.

Sanskriti: Sevakji, I not only agree it is the Hindu presenters who have neglected to enunciate the positive side of the three values. At least in a major part, this should be laid at the table of the swamis, gurus and monks who carry a negative puritanical attitude toward these rather earthly or so-called materialistic values. These men as a rule carry a wholesale predilection for the spiritual and want to project the wholly spiritual image of Hinduism or Vedanta to the world. Because their own attitude toward these values is derogatory, there is no reason to expect them to present the way ordinary house holding Hindus see them. For example, they usually relegate even *dharma* as mere ritual or *karma-kanda* and regard it as at best a secondary value. Incidentally, I will skip the controversy we had on *kama* in marriage when we discussed Gandhi's inclusion of celibacy in his eleven vows.

Sevak: Sanskriti, I know you have heard many of these gurus and swamis in pursuit of your philanthropy work. What you say is at least partly responsible for the situation. That is why I said that Hinduism should accept the blame on the matter and, as we are about to, seek to correct the distortion created in the mind of thinkers outside the Hindu fold. Talk about *Kama-sutra* and Khajuraho sculptures adds to the confusion and bewilderment of non-Hindus who compare that sensualist

image with the ascetic image presented by the swamis and wonder who the Hindus really are.

Sanskriti: That clarifies the matter for me greatly, Sevakji. Sorry for the interruption.

Sevak: No problem. Let me resume. These three values, that is, *kama*, *artha* and *dharma*, form the this-worldly group, so to say . . .

Darshana: Sevakji, another classification divides them as *kama* and *artha* against *dharma* and *moksha*. But I'm sorry to interrupt.

Sevak: You are right, Darshana. That two-and-two classification also has the merit of separating the four into two meaningful groups of which one concerns egoistic desires while the other caters to ethical and spiritual values.

Anyway, let us look at them separately and in the way they are misleadingly depicted in many circles. *Kama*, the first one, is rather unintelligently narrated to be nothing but raw sex. *Artha*, the second one, is hopelessly isolated as nothing but money. *Dharma*, the third one, is rendered in multiple opaque ways as piety, cosmic law, religious obligation, rituals and so on. These renderings and even explanations are not merely narrow and confusing but inaccurate and misleading.

On top, they belittle and disparage the notions involved. While one may argue that the original concepts themselves are never elaborated in positive and clear terms, we here and all others who are engaged in constructing a viable Hinduism for Today ought to bring out what is useful, relevant, beneficial and positive in the concepts and weed out any negative accretions involved. Remember that our charge in this seminar is primarily normative.

Beyond this, let me wind up my statement and invite Sanskriti to present the conversations she had with Madhyama on the first two goals that led to the snapshot rendering which indeed is innovative, creative and rightfully communicative.

Sanskriti: Well, I have never shied away hiding my face at the mention of sex and money. *Kama* and *artha* understood or rather misunderstood as simply sex and merely money represent a gross miscaricature of Hindu intentions and sensibilities. The latter have been woefully distorted by Victorian moral pretensions, which were abetted by a few generations of false gurus. I am using strong language against a seemingly conservative trend in Hinduism, so my apologies to Sanatan.

Mahila: Sanatan is a good sport, though. Are you not, Sanatan?

Sanatan: Well, I'd like to know more about what is involved before showing my sportsman's spirit! Anyway, I am not sure if we are going to rehash the unresolved controversy we had on Gandhi's inclusion of celibacy, as just pointed out.

Sanskriti: You surely deserve to know more, Sanatan. And, also to correct what you may find to be my excesses. I will match your generosity.

My simple point is that while sex may be regarded as a paradigm example of *kama* and money that of *artha*, the two notions are composite and go much farther than sex and money. Not just that, sex and money themselves are not understood in the crude, simple-minded and puritanical, often hypocritical, way in which they are disparaged in modern-day gurus' discourses.

For one thing, Sanskrit literature, including poetry and poetics, is replete with positive, artistic and ecstatic descriptions of *shringara-rasa* or romance in its two forms: union or *sambhoga-shringara* and separation or *vipralambha-shringara*. You can find crudity and moral looseness in some lesser poets and dramatists; but so can you in any literature of the world. In these days of expanded consciousness it may even look lively and in tune rather than obscene and decadent as it still does to the generations of Hindu gurus with their ascetic Puritanism descending from their monastic legacy or borrowed from the Victorian Age.

While Victorian exegetes of the West scoffed at depictions of erotic details in classical literature and art, with the Hindu monks chiming in quickly and instinctively, a wave of more enlightened and woman-friendly attitude to women in regard to their sexual experience had occurred as a continuous feature in classical Sanskrit eras. It goes without saying, as far as any connoisseur is concerned, that depictions of eroticism in Hinduism have been enveloped in beautiful art. In fact, there has been a strong tradition in this regard.

Mahila: There is certainly a good point that Sanskriti alluded to here. Compared to Western culture, Indian culture has traditionally depicted erotica and romance in a much more female-friendly way. Western culture, influenced by Christian rendering of sex as "original sin" and woman as Eve the temptress, has tended to regard woman as the root of evil and at best as a sex object.

Sanskriti: To be fair, though, Mahila, Hindu culture too has, under the influence of mendicant sub-culture, has showed an inclination to portray woman as the evil source of male libido. So, there is a sort of dual treatment of women in Hinduism. On the one hand, we have the male chauvinist attitude of disparagement but on the other hand classical Sanskrit literature and cognate fields have depicted sex and woman's role in it as respectable and more understanding of her participation and experience.

Darshana: Sanskriti has been making a forceful case. Sevakji, you are a Sanskritist by profession. Do you concur with her about her point about sex in Sanskrit literature?

Sevak: I won't be able to find a lot of evidence to disprove Sanskriti's thesis on the positive attitude toward erotica in classical Sanskrit literature and art. Of course you can find a good deal that would support her thesis. As to her criticism of the gurus' Puritanism, I would like to defer to Sanatan to hear out his feelings and thoughts. If anything, we should hear from both sides on the matter.

Sanatan: I have given the matter further thought after we played out the controversy issuing from discussing Gandhi on celibacy. In that light I find myself with rather ambivalent feelings. And, they do not project coherent thinking either. I can think of places in the Sanskrit literature beginning as far back as the Vedas and the Upanishads where there are explicit references to erotic pleasure without any form of strong condemnation. On the other hand, I can also think of places in the *Smritis* and *Puranas* where eroticism is roundly condemned.

Considering the *Bhagavad-gita*, I remember Lord Krishna in chapter sixteen and other places condemning materialistic hedonists in strong language on both *kama* and *artha*. But, to counter that, I also remember him in chapter seven, saying that he is, of all things, *kama* or carnal desire . . .

Sanskriti: Sanatan, I would not call *kama* as simple carnal desire. If you have to use the word desire, "artful desire" would rather be more appropriate. Sorry to interrupt, Sanatan.

Sanatan: I will respect your sensibility here, Sanskriti. Krishna himself having shown such an art in this regard would perhaps concur with you. But in chapter seven, verse eleven, he refers to all living beings, so you may probably forgive the rendering as carnal desire.

Sanskriti: I see the point, Sanatan, now. I won't press my point too much.

Sanatan: Thanks, Sanskriti. Lord Krishna here emphasizes that he is *kama* or carnal desire, provided it is not against *dharma* or propriety . . .

Madhyama: Why not *dharma* as moral fulfillment, as we have rendered the term here?

Sanatan: I will grant that, Darshana. He also enjoins performing *yajna* or sacrificial rites and *dana* or charity at all times. Performing these is not possible by anyone other than an economically productive householder. Anyway, this does not dissipate my ambivalent feelings here.

Somebody, help me!

Darshana: If this is of any help, Sanatan, Shri-Krishna's disapproval does not seem to be about *kama* itself but about the egotists who use it licentiously. By identifying himself with *kama* or desire in all living beings within boundaries of moral fulfillment, responsibility and propriety, he is placing himself in a widely open-minded position on the point made very responsible with a moderating tinge of conservatism.

Sanatan: That's helpful, Darshana. Thank you. Sanskriti, where do you stand in light of this?

Sanskriti: Perhaps in a passionate moment I inadvertently let go of my own conservatism. I'd never dream of taking an open mind on erotica to the level of free love or anything of that ilk. Expression of erotic feelings and needs should definitely not be shunned but, at the same time, it should certainly stay within a necessary modicum of good, respectful and tasteful boundary. Even I admit of a prudish moment occasionally. Yes, I would certainly be concerned if Shri-Krishna's qualification about *dharma* is taken to mean and include vituperative disparagements from all over the *Smritis* and *Puranas* that Sanatan referred to.

Sanatan: My respect for the sages who wrote the *Smritis* and *Puranas* won't let me dismiss their statements out of hand. So, I am still cornered in some ambiguity in the matter.

Madhyama: I love Shri-Krishna emerging as a moderate on the issue. Sevakji, isn't he also moderate in wider respects?

Sevakji: Certainly. In chapter six. Sanatan will help me with the exact verses.

Sanatan: Chapter six, verses sixteen and seventeen.

Sevak: Thanks, Sanatan. There Shri Krishna praises a spiritual practitioner who is moderate in eating, sleeping and general activities. He contrasts it to one who goes to extremes in all these. I believe we have alluded to this in a previous session in another context.

Navin: Sanskriti, you made a forceful case for a positive and open mind toward *kama*. In this light, I see the propriety of rendering *kama* as physical needs. This has the effect of forcing attention. For, it is hard to argue against needs. One can pounce upon wants and even desires, but needs are unassailable. Of course, this does not mean I now think less of Gandhi's vow of celibacy. Or, am I in two minds too? What is happening around here today?! Help me, God!

Anish: May Gandhi help you, Navin!

Mahila: The term "physical needs" also draws attention to things like shelter, clothing, health, fitness, sports and so on that demand consideration. Besides, a host of arts involved with this are implicated, such as fashion, physical culture and so on.

Sanskriti: Thank you, Mahila. Arts that depict or permit erotic expression are obviously involved. Further, fine arts and performing arts also come under the purview of *kama*. Sixty-four basic arts are traditionally cultivated under *kama*. And, don't forget, Kama is a god too, called Kama-deva. The sage Vatsyayana in his famous or infamous *Kama-sutra* makes an interesting point that *kama* as generic pleasure is the intrinsic value to which *artha* or social values are subsidiary. Social values derive their meaning, use and purpose only as being instruments to achieving pleasure or happiness. He takes the argument further, to the point that *kama* is the foundational intrinsic value even behind *dharma* and *moksha*.

The point is that *dharma*, per sage Vatsyayana, involves belief in the efficacy of good deeds on earth producing pleasures in heaven or in next life. This way thinking, the end-result is pleasure or *kama* in case of both *artha* and *dharma*. To take the matter into further controversy, an argument can be made that *moksha* or final fulfillment is conceived as just a maximal valorization of pleasure or joy after all. *Brahman* as *sat*,

chit and ananda also involves *ananda* or bliss, which is an extension of pleasure, joy or happiness.

Sanatan: To be fair, the Vedic statement comes to mind: *kamas tad agre samavartatadhi*, meaning *kama* prevailed at the origin of things. *Kama* as desire is connected with *manas* or mind also in a significant way in the *shruti*. However, the hedonic content in *artha*, *dharma* and *moksha* need not be the same as in *kama* and need also not be imported from *kama*. But, still feeling ambiguous, I can't and won't deny it altogether in *artha*, *dharma* and *moksha*. Darshana, how do philosophers deal with this?

Darshana: Variously, Sanatan! Surprised? Analysis of pleasure in relation to good is one of the big problem areas in the history of philosophy. So, Sanatan, also Navin and Sanskriti, take heart, you are in distinguished intellectual company when you feel ambivalence about the goodness of pleasure. The debate in philosophy goes back to Socrates who distinguished pleasure and good sharply, influencing Plato and, down the line, St. Augustine and much of subsequent Christian philosophy. Aristotle, on the other hand, was not that ascetic. Modern discussions have utilitarians talking about pleasure in various relations to good or utility. On the other hand, deontologists like Kant would relegate pleasure to hypothetical imperative. In Indian philosophy, we do not find such discussions in explicit detail on this matter.

Sevak: Darshana, the *Katha Upanishad* famously distinguishes between *shreya* or good and *preya* or pleasure.

Darshana: My goodness! Thank you, Sevakji, for correcting me. Often, hedonism of Charvaka is conflated with his materialism and then dismissed along with his heterodoxy by almost everybody else. This is perhaps the prude aspect of Indian thought, so well assailed by Sanskriti. The contrast is with Sanskrit poetics, which has accorded *shringara* or romance almost unanimously as the highest sentiment or *rasa* among a host of competitors. The contrast is sustained by various expressions of erotica in fine and performing arts.

Sanskriti: Ambiguous, indeed! I won't blame Sanatan for not being clearer on the issue. He after all has made progress from opposition to ambivalence!

Navin: Me too, Sanskriti!

Darshana: If we look at both Eastern and Western cultures as a historical whole, we see the ambiguity with clarity. What, ambiguity with clarity? Isn't that an oxymoron!

Madhyama: No, Darshana, what you're saying is obvious. But let us not pretend to untie this historic tangle. Let's move on to complete our discussion of English rendering of the four goals in the Hindu art of life. But I must remark that we sort of revisited the unresolved issue of *kama* and *brahma-charya* and moved it around some. I am not sure if we made any real progress toward resolving it, though. Well, as we decided then, we are not going to find a solution to all debatable issues.

Apparently, through our conversation till now, we've found the rendering of *kama* as physical needs and artha as social values to be quite satisfactory. On route, we referred to the rendering of *moksha*, the fourth and highest goal in the art of Hindu life, as spiritual freedom. I remember good things being said about it. But, before we get to it, we should talk about moral fulfillment as the rendering of the third and very important goal called *dharma*.

Sanskriti: I want to learn more about that pithy-sounding but not entirely clear expression. I have heard of moral obligation and aesthetic fulfillment, but combining "moral" with "fulfillment" is what does not quite sink in. Help!

Madhyama: Both Darshana and Sevakji had a big hand in that phrase so, if I may, I will pass the buck.

Darshana: Sevakji, do you want to take up the religious side of it first? I will then follow it up with the philosophical side.

Sevak: Yes, both philosophical and religious aspects are intertwined in the all-important concept of *dharma*. Sometimes the word *dharma* is used even as a translation of the word "religion." We have perhaps talked about it to some extent in another context. Nevertheless, it bears repetition.

Sanskriti pointed out how pleasure with its cognates like happiness, joy, satisfaction, fulfillment and bliss, plays a significant role in life for all humans. The concept of pleasure is variously distinguished, in both degree and kind, from these cognates by different thinkers through history. Darshana will talk about that. What is important is the vital connection between morality and pleasure in the Hindu view. This is not made explicit in the texts and is hence to be surmised through insight.

At one level, performance of moral obligation earns one a proportionate reward in this or a subsequent life. That this should be so is patently obvious to Hindu intuition and is ratified by the Hindu understanding of the law of karma. This reward is of course in terms of pleasing experiences deserved by the discharge of moral responsibility.

Now let us take the example of someone who disavows such favorable results of moral actions. Common sense will tell us that only a fool will do this. But in the spirit of *karma-yoga*, that is, in pursuit of the spiritual path of selfless action, a Hindu will eschew common sense and will disavow these favorable results. If he or she believes in God, the results may be offered to God. If not, they may be turned over to humanity or to the universe.

Anish: I am glad you are making room for a non-theistic *karma-yoga*, Sevakji.

Sanatan: Earlier I have been taken by ambivalence on whether a conservative Hindu can disavow God.

Anish: I remember that, Sanatan.

Sanatan: The only example of a successful spiritual practitioner that Lord Krishna gives in the Gita is that of Janaka and, in the third chapter, he says very clearly that Janaka reached the highest spiritual experience through performing moral actions alone. I was just going to point that out to support Sevakji's statement.

Sevak: Thank you, Sanatan. Now, the highest spiritual experience avowedly includes *ananda* or bliss, one of the high-end cognates of pleasure. At the level of willing performance of moral action without regard to reward, the law of karma says that the action cannot go without bearing its fruit. So, in this case the fruit takes the shape of a distinct sense of fulfillment.

Take the standard example of a mother who readily sacrifices her self-interest for the sake of her child. Her acts are "rewarded" by an inner feeling of satisfaction. Cynics take pleasure in pointing out that do-gooders always do "good" only because they want to feel this pleasure. They want to put everyone who feels whatever pleasure at par with the common feeling of pleasure when you get the expected result of hard work.

Mahila: The cynics should answer if diabolical pleasure of torturing a child is also at the same level in their view.

Darshana: A great logical point, Mahila!

Sevak: To cut the matter short, it is this higher or deeper sense of fulfillment you feel when you do good for its own sake that is a sort of minimized version or a sneak preview of spiritual experience. That is why the word "fulfillment" has a special significance in the rendering of *dharma* as moral fulfillment.

Hence, to put it another way, "feeling good" is an uncharitable way of describing what people experience on discharging their moral responsibility or on performing their ethical duty in life, such as taking good loving care of their ailing parents. On the contrary, it is their rightful inner reward for acting morally without regard to any kind of reward. This I see as a real point behind translating *dharma* as moral fulfillment.

Sanskriti: Thank you, Sevakji, for linking *kama* and *dharma* in such a subtle manner. Of course I understand that pleasure received as a reward is "different" from such spiritual-like pleasure received from discharging one's duty.

Sevak: Can I take it that the significance of rendering the term *dharma* with "moral fulfillment" is brought home here?

Madhyama: Yes, Sevakji. If I can summarize the whole matter discussed so far, all the four goals explicitly or in a subtle manner connect with, if not always derive from, *ananda* or joy in a significant way. *Kama*, or physical needs, does it explicitly. *Artha*, or social values, when it is accomplished, also does it explicitly although probably less intensely.

Sanskriti: Madhyama, it may be your academic background that makes you think so? Ask someone who finds a job after years of search in a bad economy, to take one example.

Mahila: Or, to take an example from Sanskriti's own turf, ask an artist who gains well-deserved recognition after decades of arduous struggle.

Madhyama: I stand corrected, Sanskriti, Mahila. I should not underestimate the joy content on accomplishing social values. As I rethink the matter some, I recall talking to Darshana and Sevakji about

the joy content of *kama*, *artha*, *dharma* and *moksha* getting qualitatively better in that sequence.

Navin: I always had an intuitive feeling about that. I am pleased to have it confirmed this way, Madhyama.

Madhyama: Excellent, Navin. To sum up, the quality of joy gets better, deeper, or higher, depending on the metaphor you choose, as one compares accomplishment in the areas of *kama*, *artha*, *dharma* and *moksha*. To wind up the matter, *moksha* in fact refers to the level of fulfillment, which, as Sevakji likes to put it, is terminal. There is no way a human can even imagine deeper fulfillment after reaching the experience of *moksha* or what we render as "spiritual freedom" in English.

Sevakji, have I usurped your territory in trying to finish up the religious or spiritual aspect of the four *purusharthas*, or objects of human effort, in the Hindu art of life?

Sevak: No, Darshana. In fact, you supplemented me with a good, brief, pithy account of it. Now to Darshana on the philosophical significance of our English rendering of the Sanskrit terms *kama*, *artha*, *dharma* and *moksha*.

Navin: Sevakji, before Darshana picks up the thread, I'd like you to articulate a short narrative about the four values in relation to alternatives in other religions.

Madhyama: Sevakji, that looks like a good point.

Sevak: Briefly, the Hindu values cover a wide range, compared to most religions whose range is narrower. *Kama* and *artha*, which issue from physical needs and social values . . .

Sanskriti: Sorry to interrupt, Sevakji, but I want to thank you, yet again, this time for saying they issue from rather than are the same as physical needs and social values. This would indicate to me that they themselves should be thought of as wider than the ranges of needs and values in question. This would include arts, humanities and social sciences, possibly leaving out only the physical sciences.

Sevak: I cannot say I didn't have at the back of my mind the implication you draw, Sanskriti. But Darshana will aver that the values do not quite

envisage the intellectual content and orientation that the Western concepts of humanities and social sciences incorporate.

Darshana: That's true, Sevakji.

Mahila: But, given the current flavor of Western disciplines moving away from pure intellectuality under the impact of feminist, pluralist and multi-cultural orientations, there might be a point in Sanskriti including these disciplines in some way. Might not they be implicated by *kama and artha*, if not precisely included?

Anish: I may be stretching this thread a bit, but physical needs to me are capable of implicating physical sciences as well.

Sanatan: Even if we implicate just the applied side of the sciences as relevant for life values, the pure side will kick in albeit as a little less relevant.

Aanish: Also, we need to consider them included in light of our present endeavor to construct a Hinduism for Today.

Sevak: We are flying off along multiple tangents now. Let me try to put it together.

Taking the most recent point first, I cannot really rule out widening the range of four values to include practically the entire panorama of human knowledge. Hinduism can surely bring a desirable, humane and salient perspective to human knowledge if it includes the panorama in its purview rather than just follow the lead of the West. But, it does appear that it may be Hinduism for tomorrow or beyond rather than today which is our first present charge. Of course, I am not shelving it for a distant future and I do admit the point of including it from a long-range perspective.

The second point is about comparing the four Hindu values with their counterpart in other religions. I was saying that, even as they are, without incrementing them with modern sciences, they are wider than what most religions envisage. In fact, the official content of many world religions is limited by doctrine, specifically within their conservative wings. If we look at the spiritual extensions of these religions, they too are restricted by their doctrinal fences.

Of course, we are discounting the *de facto* admission of secular content in these religions even as the conservatives continue to disdain it. Such involuntary or inadvertent secular values have made their inroads

everywhere. The interesting point is that in Hinduism they are admitted *ab initio* at the scriptural level. This gives the Hindu value group a distinct head-start, even unique ground to stand on in terms of reform and renovation that is continually needed.

Navin: Thank you, Sevakji, for acknowledging the need for reform in Hinduism.

Sevak: No problem, Navin. However, the need for preserving the good is also equally legit.

Sanatan: Thank you, Sevakji.

Sevak: No problem, Sanatan. So, Hinduism stands on conveniently wide ground to both incorporate the needed change and also to preserve the good in it. We can say that the four values together and their spirit provide a fulcrum as comprehensive as life itself, eminently and explicitly covering physical, social, ethical and spiritual arenas. On top, as we just averred, we can import further realms on the wide basis already in place.

The last point I want to make with regard to alternative value schemes in other religions is that their limitation issues from their ethical dicta resulting from their religious doctrine. *Dharma* in Hinduism, on the other hand, can range widely all by itself, encompassing almost all aspects of life. The *smriti* literature is replete with incursions in every individual's life at all its stages, from birth to cremation.

Sanatan: Even beyond birth and cremation, Sevakji. The sixteen *sanskaras* or sacraments in Hinduism start at conception and won't end even with death. They extend to *shraddha* or annual oblations forever offered to the ancestors who have long since departed.

Sevak: Point well taken, Sanatan. I rest my case, Madhyama.

Madhyama: OK, Sevakji. I don't think we need a more elaborate narrative on what other religions offer as alternatives to the Hindu fourfold value set. But Navin, who raised this query, should have the final word on this.

Navin: I won't press my query further at this point, Darshana. Thank you for asking me.

Madhyama: You're welcome, Navin. It is clear to me, Sevakji, from your narrative, that the simple looking set of four Hindu values of life truly encompasses a vast array of human endeavors and life situations.

Now let us get back to the original thread. Darshana is to expound the philosophical side of the four values in the art of Hindu life.

Darshana: I will try to be brief, because Madhyama has yet to embark on the next stage, that of an expanded version of her 108-word extravaganza. The four classical values of Hindu thought, as we have seen, have not received their spiritual or philosophical due through their awkward renderings and opaque articulations, let alone supercilious attacks by hostile commentators who have readily preyed on these lexical weaknesses.

When it comes down to age-old problems of philosophy, I will not presently pretend to solve them or attribute putative solutions to the Hindu values of life on their account. Glib apologetics or hyperbolic panegyric is not a part of my repertoire. I call the shots as I see the matter.

The division of philosophy that deals with values is called axiology of which, not surprisingly, both ethics and aesthetics are two subdivisions. Of course, one can argue that ethics is more than theory of moral values, especially if one exalts the deontological specter.

Anish: Darshana, you are beginning to fly over my head.

Sanskriti: Mine too.

Mahila: And mine.

Navin: I am looking for my head.

Darshana: Sorry, guys! I wrongly thought I would get by. In my hurry to be brief, I got into technical terms of philosophy. Let me see if I can be brief without using technical terms.

Sevak: That is always a challenge, Darshana. Relax and do what you can.

Darshana: Sevakji, I was only trying to emulate you. But, you are a hard act to follow. You covered the religious side so briefly and cleverly.

Sevak: I was afraid the cleverness would not escape your keen conceptual eye, Darshana.

Sanskriti: What was that about, Darshana?

Darshana: I was obliquely referring to the neat way in which Sevakji covered value stands of other religions without naming names. Very easily, naming names can also get involved in politics, which we want to avoid.

Mahila: Wow! I understand. There is no need to throw stones at other houses even from a sound stone structure.

Sanatan: It's another matter when they throw stones at us, Mahila.

Mahila: Yes, Sanatan. We, as anyone else on the block, have a right to self-defense, self-preservation and self-determination.

Anish: Well put, Mahila.

Madhyama: Darshana, jump in.

Darshana: Let's see. I need to recast my narrative in simpler terms. A serious theory of value should be comprehensive. The Hindu view of four values of life, called *purusharthas*, is quite comprehensive. This would be clear if we view them without yellow tinted glasses of adverse interpretations or imported perspectives. The narrow casting has occurred obviously through foreign pens. This can be excused in case it is not hostile, for the reason that an alien culture and its thought are not easy to penetrate. But it has happened also with the indigenous thinkers. I can only attribute it to insufficient philosophical training and imagination.

Sanskriti: I too am philosophically innocent, Darshana.

Darshana: But you restrain yourself from opining on the sophisticated value systems of other cultures and religions.

Sanskriti: Yes, whereof one cannot speak, thereof one should be silent.

Darshana: I am glad you took Wittgenstein's *Tractatus* to the heart, Sanskriti.

Mahila: Hey, what's that about?

Anish: What's going on?

Sanskriti: Well, I could not pass up the opportunity to show off the little knowledge of philosophy I picked up in a conversation with Darshana a month ago.

Darshana: The point is that lack of philosophical training and imagination does not deter a host of commentators on Hindu value system from making inane criticisms. Wittgenstein, arguably the greatest philosopher of the twentieth century, said at the end of his book called *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus,* or *Tractatus* for short, that whereof one cannot speak thereof one should be silent. So, Sanskriti was agreeing with me that these insufficiently competent people should remain silent rather than voice their inane judgments about the Hindu value system.

Anish, Mahila: Thank you, Darshana.

Sanskriti: I'll try to restrain myself in future, folks. But I won't promise it.

Sanatan: We'll put up with you, Sanskriti, haven't we always?

Sanskriti: That's one thing I really like about this group. It's very congenial.

Darshana: But no Miss Congeniality award for you, Sanskriti.

Sanskriti: I'll be congenial enough: I won't mind!

Darshana: Back to professionally lacking ventures into criticizing Hindu value system by some thinkers who are habitually hostile to Hinduism. Hinduism is their persistent target.

Sanatan: The proverbial Hindu tolerance and even collusion at times makes it easy for them.

Darshana: True. But let us return to how Madhyama's English rendering of the four Sanskrit terms of Hindu value system has more than casual philosophical significance. You know that there is a branch of

philosophy called ethics where morality is discussed. When ethicists talk about what is good, right or virtuous, they are supposed to engage in normative ethics because they are trying to lay down a norm or a standard to judge what should count as good, right or virtuous.

Madhyama: The group seems to be with you now, Darshana.

Darshana: Good. Let me know when I start getting overhead again. When a moral philosopher says that it is good to produce certain values in life, he or she is said to hold a theory called consequentialism.

Madhyama: Is that because he or she is saying that it is good to produce that value as a consequence of one's actions or behavior?

Darshana: Precisely, Madhyama. On the other hand, when a moralist insists that certain actions are right per se, that means, they should be done as a duty or just because it is right to do them, regardless of consequences, the theory involved is called non-consequentialism or deontology.

Sanatan: Darshana, what is more valid: consequentialism or deontology?

Darshana: Wish I could tell you, Sanatan. This has been discussed in philosophy for about two thousand years to no clear end.

Sanskriti: I give up, Darshana. I promise I won't go near that problem. I don't want to live another thousand or so years.

Darshana: OK, Sanskriti, I see you don't want to live another thousand years. But suppose you can, by some miracle. Do you not want to live that long because you won't be producing good enough consequences or you just hate the idea of hanging around that long?

Sanskriti: I can't tell, Darshana.

Darshana: See how it is not easy to say which is better between consequentialism and deontology?

Sanskriti: I got it, Darshana.

Sanatan: Me too.

Darshana: It is also not easy to mix the two in a harmonious system. Many people, any way, go one way and do not like the other option. Those who want to produce desirable values do not want to do things just because they are right. Those who prefer to do their duties without regard to results think that seeking results is not a noble pursuit.

Navin: Won't we say that most of the time ordinary folks want pleasure and also want money hoping that it will produce pleasure?

Sanskriti: I will say that if you take pleasure and money from people's lives, not many will even want to live.

Darshana: Yes, that makes the world tick, so to say. We demand pleasure, happiness, joy, satisfaction, fulfillment, bliss or whatever you call it. That is why many ethical thinkers are consequentialists.

Sanatan: But a life of pursuing pleasure is not really that satisfying after all. We have to rise above that at some point and seek something better.

Darshana: Like, say, making contribution to humanity in a selfless manner?

Sanatan: Exactly.

Darshana: That is why there are philosophers who turn to a life of duty rather than a life of pleasure. For example, Kant would call that categorical imperative compared to the life of pleasure, which he would berate as hypothetical imperative.

Anish: Darshana, I now want desperately to descend to my beloved concrete earth from these abstract heights. Help me!

Darshana: We are getting there very soon, Anish. Remember *kama* and *artha* in the Hindu value system?

Anish: So, Hinduism embraces life of pleasure and making money, thereby acknowledging what most people want most of the time anyway?

Sanatan: But then it also seeks to outgrow those adult toys into something nobler, namely, moral responsibility of *dharma*?

Darshana: You got it, Anish and Sanatan. So, the three Hindu values let you have the best of this world: pleasure and happiness at the level of *kama*, opportunity to earn a livelihood and to have a family and social life at the level of *artha* and satisfying the aspiration to contribute to society, humanity and planet at the level of *dharma*. It does not deny what we want anyway but supplements it with a sense of more worthwhile achievement with a chance of contributing to the society, humanity or planet. I call *kama* and *artha* as both egoistic and acquisitive values. *Dharma*, on the other hand, is a contributive value, which also accommodates the higher purpose of serving humanity, all other living beings and the environment as well.

Very importantly, as we saw earlier, *dharma* being rendered as moral fulfillment, it does not negate the deeper fulfillment people get when they make a relatively selfless contribution toward others' well being.

Finally, *moksha* or spiritual freedom is the culminating value of life where the individual is challenged to seek and achieve the most demanding and the most rewarding value of life, namely, cultivating for the deepest source of internal and intrinsic fulfillment in life, the one within one's true self. This spiritual goal is experiential and not just verbal, conceptual or doctrinal belief, which of course is the puny first step toward the actual and concrete spiritual experience that Sevakji fittingly calls terminal fulfillment of human life.

How did I do, Sevakji?

Sevak: Excellent, Darshana.

Madhyama: Outstanding, Darshana.

Sanatan: Darshana, earlier you mentioned virtuous in the same breath as you talked about good and right. We, or rather you, then talked about good and right under consequentialism and deontology. Are virtues not that important in your vision of the Hindu value system? I always thought they were a large part of dharma.

Darshana: Indeed they are, Sanatan. Thank you for your keen eye or, rather, ear in catching that third line of thinking in normative ethics. That line of thought is called virtue ethics. Hindu value system at once does justice to all the three major aspects of normative ethics, namely, consequentialism, deontology and virtue ethics. Madhyama is going to show us the way to virtues in her expanded version of moderate Hinduism.

Madhyama: Well, in a way, Manu's list of ten virtues is already a part of the snapshot Hinduism of my 108 words. In fact, while the snapshot is going to expand as a whole the ten are going to shrink to four.

Sanskriti: I am for that, Madhyama. I would have a hard time keeping track of ten. I almost had a fit with Goyandka's forty that Sanatan brought in and even with Gandhi's eleven that Navin expounded. These are very large numbers of virtues to keep in mind all the time.

Madhyama: This has brought us to a very fulfilling end of our discussion on the 108-word summary of my moderate Hinduism.

Now, let's move on to the second stage of my presentation, that is, an expanded version of my moderate Hinduism.

Sevak: Sorry to cut you off, Madhyama, at this point. We all appreciate your dedication and enthusiasm. We need to wind up today's session. We will start the next session with the expanded version of your moderate Hinduism and you will continue to lead us on that.

Darshana: How about a quick summary of today's session, Sevakji? We need to ponder the main points or highlights. I admit we took quite a number of detours today, but we did accomplish a great deal, all the same.

Sevak: Madhyama led us ably through our discussions and detours. Maybe she won't mind making a list of major points for us to carry forward to the next session?

Madhyama: I usually enjoy doing that but, this time too, I feel Darshana would be a better choice, especially in light of several subtle conceptual and philosophical pathways that we have traversed. Would you mind, Darshana?

Darshana: Well, I will take that cup of hemlock! Just kidding . . .

Mahila: A modern-day Mira?!

Madhyama: Hey, don't make me into the Rana!

Mahila: The Rani of moderate Hinduism?!

Madhyama: That makes me to think, Sevakji, what are this group's chances of recognition for all our efforts?

Sevak: Given the way things are going and looking at the entrenched interests, I won't hold my breath on us getting any form of substantial recognition. Just being realistic, not pessimistic. But we must make the effort, regardless. In the *karma-yoga* style and hoping that there will be at least some serious thought given to what we emerge with. I have no doubt about the high quality of our work but the outside world, Hindu and other, has its own ways of rendering its judgment. Maybe, down the line in the future some of our ideas may take root. Who knows? In short, we must hope for the best and yet not act prematurely as if we are going to make a great impact.

Madhyama: Of course, as we said earlier, we will respond to all constructive criticisms that come before our eye. But, thank you, Sevakji, for a meliorist view of the matter. We did not expect an empty rhetoric or just a pep talk from you.

Sevak: Thank you for understanding, Madhyama. Every minute spent with this group strengthens me spiritually. It's also been a joy. I am sure we all want to carry on and make it our best effort within human limitations.

Madhyama: We agree, Sevakji, and we are with you on that. Darshana, you have the final word.

Darshana: Yes, I must summarize very briefly the major points we made at this session. This may reflect my bias for philosophy.

Let's see. We started off with what Sanskriti described as her spirited outburst about Hinduism's underdog status. Sanatan lent his support and Sevakji led us to a reaffirmation of our commitment to both articulation and evaluation of Hinduism, hoping to arrive at a philosophically sound and spiritually viable Hinduism for Today. Under Madhyama's lead we've been calling it moderate Hinduism that is far from empty platitudes or merely rhetorical promises but is close to a carefully constructed panoramic philosophy of life for today's spiritual aspirant as well as rational thinker anywhere in the world.

Madhyama: A great start, Darshana, in your own salient style.

Darshana: Thank you, Madhyama. This is our second session under Madhyama's leadership. We are heading toward a third session on the subject of articulating our moderate Hinduism. Madhyama enunciated a slightly augmented version of her snapshot of Hinduism, this time in 108 words, in place of the original hundred words. A detour followed, on the significance of the number 108. An alphabetically moving round of comments had Sanskriti point out a serious oversight in the snapshot, regarding the mention of art. We corrected it promptly.

Sanatan voiced ruminations, which were like a very humane and deeply honest confessional. It led into a detailed consideration of *kama*, *artha* and *dharma*, the three values in the Hindu art of life, which had not attracted our serious concern before, being overshadowed by *moksha*, the highest value.

The discussion on *kama* saw strong participation by Sanskriti and Sanatan. They together showed that Hinduism has a positive attitude to *kama* or physical needs but also seeks to place it within the bounds of social propriety. Reference to the Gita's chapter six seemed to close the argument, with Shri-Krishna emerging as a moderate on several areas of life.

A point was raised about the place of happiness in pursuing the three values and even in the experience of *moksha*, which is the highest value. I said that the concept has been treated and interpreted in a variety of ways in philosophy and that the problem has been with us for millennia, if not centuries. This assuaged the feeling of disheartenment, which was developing in the group on the intractable nature of the issue of proper relation between good and pleasure. That the discussion should lead to such exasperation is for me a confirmation of the universal nature of problems of philosophy. Philosophical problems are indeed both timely and timeless. Anyone who has quick answers should think harder.

Anish: I like the way in which you promote philosophy, Darshana.

Darshana: My turn to share the hemlock, Anish!

Anish: I won't pretend that it is sweet, Darshana, but what you say makes sense to me. I am a scientist and not yet mortally infected by scientism, so I am not too bad at logical thinking.

Darshana: Good for you, Anish. The next point of discussion hovered around the third value, called *dharma*. This took us into the nature of normative ethics, especially its competing theories like consequentialism,

deontology and virtue ethics. We saw how consequentialism and deontology were entwined in a centuries old tangle but also how Hindu value theory skillfully integrated the two and gave them their respectable due. In all, the emerging thrust was that the Hindu art of life involving the four values was a comprehensive and well-knit system of value concepts and our ground-breaking English rendering of the four Sanskrit terms, *kama*, *artha*, *dharma* and *moksha* was a distinct contribution lending an air of clarity to a field hitherto laden with obscurity and hostile devaluation.

Toward the end, Sevakji presented a brief narrative on comparing the Hindu value quartet with its counterparts in world religions and showed how the Hindu four are distinguished by a unique and well-integrated comprehensiveness and conceptual tightness. I sought to show how the four values together weave forever-competing theories and concepts in philosophy into a well-knit fabric.

Another point was that the Hindu value system does not denigrate *kama* and *artha* as is done in many a system in world religions. This denigration has happened despite the universal acceptance the two enjoy in all societies throughout history. The Hindu value-structure legitimates them and integrates them within a larger system that includes moral responsibility and spiritual aspiration as highlights or priorities. As to the incorporation of virtue ethics, we await Madhyama's expanded version of moderate Hinduism in the next session.

Sevak: Great job, Darshana. That was a conceptually astute summary, doing justice to almost every major point we pondered.

Darshana: Thank you, Sevakji.

Sevak: That brings this session to an end. Thanks a lot to Madhyama for leading this second session on moderate Hinduism. I am afraid to prognosticate whether the next session will mark a definitive end to our articulation of moderate Hinduism or, should I say, Hinduism for Today. Anyway, we will certainly move in that direction. Meanwhile, reflect on today's points. We'll see you next time. Thank you all. *Namas-te*, everybody!

All: *Namas-te*, Sevakji.

SESSION 9:

FOUNDATIONS OF A HINDUSIM FOR TODAY

Sevak: *Om Tat Sat*, everybody.

All: *Om Tat Sat*, Sevakji.

Sevak: Welcome back. This is our ninth session. Madhyama has very ably led us on moderate Hinduism for the last two sessions. I am not going to predict whether this will be our last session on the subject, meaning that we will have a good enough articulation of moderate Hinduism by the end of the meeting to qualify as a closure on our construction of a Hinduism for Today. Our beauteous tendency to fly off tangents and to flow along detours with what we will at any moment makes prediction hazardous. I am also not about to dictate a closure, for we must finish our business our way without any artificial restraints.

Sanskriti: I like flying like a bird in the open sky any way.

Anish: Like a good engineer I'd fly in an airplane rather. But I will vote for free flowing discussion and not risk having to come back to a point painfully and out of context.

Mahila: I will second that motion, if it is a motion.

Darshana: This motion will always pass in this group, because we are not glued to a rigid pre-ordained structure. Moreover, our tangents eventually help us to secure our conclusions from diverse, unforeseen and sometimes seemingly unrelated but really important perspectives. We will perhaps take detours before we reach our final framework of Hinduism for Today, but more likely we will secure the framework that way, covering viewpoints from different sides of the matter.

Mahila: Good, can I interject something related to a point of last session? I just don't know why I passed up the opportunity when the context was ripe and knocking on the door.

Sevak: What do you say, Madhyama?

Madhyama: Go on, Mahila.

Mahila: Thank you, Madhyama. Remember our talk about fake gurus, often swamis and monks of different denominations, variously denouncing *kama* and *artha* under the influence of their puritanical asceticism? Sanskriti launched an objection to their denunciation on the ground that it inappropriately curtails expression and fulfillment of the two important and, as we discussed, probably the most universal propensities of human nature everywhere.

Sanatan: I remember that, Mahila. However, I want to request that we do not challenge their *bona fides* based on a differing perspective and judgment on the significance of the two values. In addition, these swamis and monks have sacrificed their own opportunity to earn *kama* and *artha* for the sake of spiritual good. They work selflessly for others who are not as accomplished as they are on the spiritual journey. They are quite advanced in their own spiritual pursuit. This is just a point of mild demurral to voice concern that we do not disrespect these fine servants of society and of God.

Sanskriti: Sanatan, I agree on the point of respect and apologize if I sounded flippant and disrespectful toward the renunciates in the Hindu society and their dedication, accomplishments and contributions. I am talking about the bad apples in the basket. There are quite a few of them going around at high decibel pitch nowadays. De you see where I was coming from?

Sanatan: I do see that, Sanskriti and I respect that too. Mahila, please go on.

Mahila: I too will try to be respectful but I must point out an area where a problem exists in my own field of securing equal status for women in our society. The tendency to blame *kama* in particular as an enemy of spirituality has led to a demeaning of women in general and to a derogatory attitude toward females as a group. I am irked particularly by practices of discrimination like the *sadhus* or holy men not seeing the face of women, segregating women at open religious discourses, telling stories depicting women in culpable light just because of their gender and so on. This, in contradistinction from the lofty pedestal they place motherhood on. They seem to be saying that mothers are great goddesses but women are diabolical temptresses and all men will be good celibates but for the women.

Sanskriti: I concur and thank Mahila for bringing this out. I think we touched on this a little but I agree with her that we haven't given it the thought and language it deserves. I have seen religious gatherings where some men would be leading the singing of bhajans or devotional songs and all men in the group would be repeating after them but no women are allowed to sing along, let alone lead the singing. I was told the reason was that the sadhus or monks are sexually distracted by female singing.

Mahila: This would be awful except for the strange fact that women in the group go along with this insulting attitude of the high priests involved. Without their collusion the practice would come to a screeching halt in this day and age. I understand that such practices have existed for generations and not in Hinduism alone but in various other religions around the world.

Anish: These are the same persons who are acclaimed to be highly advanced in spiritual matters. They are supposed to have "conquered" *kama* or lust like Lord Shiva. For them to exhibit a teenager's libido toward female voice shows that they have farther to go in conquering lust than average men who show much greater restraint.

Madhyama: Mahila, you have made a point on which I do not see anyone voicing disagreement. A point well taken.

Navin: A clear case where a part of Hinduism needs reform. It won't do to excuse ourselves by saying others do it too. Moreover, I like us washing our dirty linen in public. Gandhi worked very hard in his life to promote equal treatment of women and I say he would be proud of us.

Sanatan: Luckily, such decadence has not spread widely in Hinduism.

Darshana: I think Madhyama should now resume her presentation left unfinished from last meeting. We heard her present a snapshot of Hinduism in 108 words. She is now going to present a more fully featured form of moderate Hinduism which should be close to what we are aiming at in these sessions, namely, an architectonic of Hinduism for Today.

Sevak: We won't have a closure on the architectonic without a chance to comment on it and raise points of discussion.

Madhyama: Of course, Sevakji. As indicated earlier, the expanded version of the 108-word snapshot of moderate Hinduism builds upon the snapshot. I would like to call it "Foundations of Hinduism." It's no more than a caricature at this stage and just what it says, that is, foundations, on which a variety of structures can be built at individual and group levels.

First of all, I want to acknowledge and enumerate the sources of the foundations. They are chiefly five: *shruti*, *smriti*, *itihasa*, *purana* and *darshana*. We have referred to the first four previously. This time *darshana* is included because we will be touching on philosophical aspects too. I would render the five in English language respectively as primary revelations, auxiliary revelations, exemplary history, synoptic digests and metaphysical visions.

I render *shruti* as primary revelations and *smriti* as auxiliary revelations because that is just what they are. *Shruti*, literally meaning what was heard by the sages, comprises the entire Vedic literature including the Samhitas or basic compilations of revelations to the sages, *Brahmanas* or the commentarial revelations to the sages, *Aranyakas* or the forest treatises revealed to the sages and the *Upanishads* or the mystical treatises revealed to the sages. *Shruti* or the *Vedas* understood in this wide and conventional sense form the foundation of Hindu thought and spirituality. Admittedly, questions of interpretation abound. Nevertheless, there is no escaping from the long established tradition that the *Vedas* form the foundation on which the Hindu identity is indelibly inscribed.

Conventionally, there are six *Vedangas* or limbs of *Veda,* which are studied assiduously to understand and interpret the *Veda* from the traditional perspective. They are *shiksha* or phonetics, *chhanda* or metrics, *vyakarana* or analytical linguistics, *nirukta* or exegetical hermeneutic, *jyotisha* or electional astronomy and *kalpa* or liturgical observances. The first two ensure proper enunciation of the Veda, the second two secure the meaning and proper understanding and the last two pertain to applying them in religious life.

All this description of *shruti* is meant to show the great breadth of what is involved. In my understanding the ultimate import of *shruti* is not different from the actual foundations of Hinduism I have in mind. *Shruti* of course is a prime source of the foundations. A great deal of *shruti*, properly understood, is based on or assumes the foundations. I feel a bit dismayed by a circularity here, at once saying that foundations are based on *shruti* and the *shruti* is based on foundations. But I don't see it as a vicious cycle. On the contrary it feels to me like a sensible virtuous cycle. Someone, correct me if I am wrong.

Darshana: I am intrigued. Sevakji, can you help?

Sevak: I have heard well-meaning Christians say that the Bible is based on faith and love and that faith and love are based on the Bible. In a way the two statements strengthen each other. To see a real contradiction instead would seem like an exercise in logic chopping.

Darshana: That's insightful. Yet, Sevakji, my logocentrism won't let me feel totally comfortable with the paradox. I will live with the paradox and let you live with it too. How about that?

Sevak: That is generous enough, coming from you, Darshana.

Darshana: Let's move on.

Madhyama: I thought it made sense to exhibit the scope and compass of the sources of Hinduism. However, I will skip the details if the group so thinks fit.

Sevak: Madhyama, getting the big picture is not out of context but is quite relevant for our purposes. As long as the details are brief and pertinent, you are doing well laying them out.

Darshana: I want to interject a note of clarification. As I think further I feel more persuaded by Sevakji's point. This makes me less uncomfortable with the paradox. Let me put it this way. Madhyama said that the foundations are derived from the *shruti*, which is largely based on the foundations. There is no culpable interdependence here although it may seem so to an unwary eye. It is like saying that God who is the foundation of Christianity is sourced in the Bible, which is where you find God in the first place. That the Bible is based on God is not diminished because God is based on the Bible, or vice versa. It just got to be that way. So, similarly, *Brahman* is the foundation of the *Upanishads,* which are part of the *shruti* literature; at the same time *Upanishads* or *shruti* is where *Brahman* is found and is therefore the foundation of *Brahman*.

Madhyama: Thank you, Darshana, for the pithy clarification. Sevakji, I will try to avoid a needless recount of detail. The vast scope of the Vedic literature is obvious to a keen eye. The studious attempt of the sages to enunciate ways of understanding and implementing the main corpus of the Vedas is a testimony to the meticulous care with which they have

nurtured the *shruti*. Let us also keep in mind that a large amount of their works is lost to the ravages of time and we therefore have to judge their pronouncements and surmises on the basis of what is left. Some, needless to say, have ventured forth with negative comments based on a cursory look at the expanse of what is available rather than the much vaster literature that the sages had in front of their eyes and minds to peruse and dispense.

Sanatan: Madhyama, I am impressed with the care you yourself have taken to show the true scope and worth of the *shruti* or the primary source of Hinduism.

Madhyama: Thanks, Sanatan. Of course, the sixteen foundations I have come up with . . .

Sanskriti: Sixteen?! You too are going to overwhelm me with a large number of points?

Madhyama: Looking at the vastness of just the *shruti* literature, the number sixteen does not seem to be too large. If I aimed at a really detailed representation of all the five sources, I would have to compose a large volume rather than a one-page synopsis of the foundations.

Sanskriti: Oh, if all the foundations are on a single page, I will applaud you heartily, Madhyama.

Madhyama: Yes, indeed, the sixteen foundations do not occupy more space than one page. They are structured and divided to further facilitate understanding.

Sanatan: The *shruti* literature, especially the *Brahmana* volumes that comment on the *Samhitas*, often mention the *Shodashi Prajapati* or the primeval source of the universe as involving sixteen features. This concept is among the very difficult ones for understanding with interpretations abounding in both adulatory and derogatory directions as usual among traditional and alien scholars. But the number sixteen, I want to point out, is quite significant in this context.

Madhyama: Thank you, Sanatan, for the mathematical reassurance on the significance of the number sixteen. My sixteen-fold configuration is divided in four categories with four items in each division. But let me first complete a caricature of the five sources of Hinduism I want to

enunciate. I want to say that the five together comprise a solid and sufficient ground to make up a great foundation of Hinduism in sixteen blocks, so to say.

My second source is *smriti,* which I rendered as auxiliary revelations to the sages. By now all of us know that while *shruti* is what the sages of yore heard and directly recorded, *smriti* is, literally, what they remembered after the revelation. Hence it is that *smriti* is authoritative when it does not contradict *shruti* and when *shruti* is silent on the topic in question.

The *smriti* literature is also very large. There is a point of view I heard that the sages wrote the *smriti* treatises to describe what they thought was the best way to organize the Hindu community in their day and age. This is why, in spite of common topics being detailed, they evince a veritable diversity of ways to organize the community. A Sanskrit saying goes thus: *sa na munir yasya matir na bhinna*. It means there is no sage who does not have a different opinion! It shows how the sages often disagreed with each other and carried on dialog that must have encompassed terrifically interesting material. Unfortunately, we have lost texts that inscribed the detailed arguments, which must have occurred within the dialog. Stray specimens, however, are available as evidentiary exhibits in the *Brahmanas* and the *Upanishads*.

Two *smriti* books, often called law books in a less than accurate parlance, stand out: one by Manu and the other by Yajnavalkya. The latter has enjoyed an incontrovertible status in legal courts for centuries, while the former is regarded by some as the substance of Hinduism.

In any case, we need to stay aware that each *smriti* work aimed at describing an optimal organization of the community in its time and environment. The sages basically sought to depict a community organization where every member or participant had the opportunity to achieve all the four values in the Hindu art of life: *kama* or physical needs, *artha* or social values, *dharma* or moral fulfillment and *moksha* or spiritual freedom. And this was to be effected in a socially harmonious manner with minimal conflict or cut throat rivalry. The idea was to make a conflict resolver like me an extinct species! Of course, this is easily said than done and the sages themselves worked as conflict resolvers and did a great job at that.

The main burden of a *smriti* treatise, also called *dharma-shastra*, is to describe in detail the divisions and manner in which Hindu community is to be organized and how each group will function to facilitate the collective goal of everyone having an opportunity to reach all the four goals of life in mutual harmony. The question whether this goal was always reached was not as important as whether more harmonious

alternatives can be devised. The modern political ideologies inspired by the West form a chief rival in this day and age. Hinduism for Today has to show itself equal to the challenge and task. I will humbly submit that the sixteen foundations of Hinduism can go a long way to meet this challenge.

Navin: Can't wait to see the sixteen principles. But, Madhyama, first finish your description of the five sources.

Madhyama: Besides the divisions of the community and their functions, each *smriti* lays down detailed description of the four stages of life: student, householder, retiree and mendicant. The four major divisions of Hindu community or, for that matter, of any society with a modicum of complex structure, are also groups of economic earners described as teachers, guardians, merchants and artisans.

Darshana: This is eerily similar to the societal divisions found in Plato's *Republic*, which may have been influenced by the Hindu law books. But the Eurocentrists who want their Plato to be the originator of all significant ideas in world history, want impossible "evidence" to "prove" this. When it comes to matters outside the West they, however, rush to negative judgments on the East without even a modicum of evidence. This double standard reached its typical acme in Hegel and his followers. Madhyama, sorry for this interjection too. Please proceed.

Madhyama: The duties of kings, women, fathers, priests and other groups are also detailed. Not all here will be to our liking in these times and with our current sensibilities. But I want to draw attention to a distinction made about *dharma* in all the *smriti* books that has great potency although it has not been accorded sufficient significance.

Darshana: This has considerable philosophical as well as practical significance.

Madhyama: Yes, Darshana. It emerged from discussion with Sevakji and Darshana. So, I do not want to take all the credit for it. But I think the group will agree on the importance and potency of the distinction.

The sages distinguish between *dharma* or moral fulfillment at the *samanya* or universal level and at the *vishesha* or specific level. Although the latter is the one that gets most space in terms of description and articulation, it is the former that has the lion's share of significance. *Samanya dharma* describes the virtues that each and every individual in

the community should cultivate and imbibe. *Vishesha dharma*, on the other hand, describes the obligations of different groups and individuals as members of the groups.

In my conversations with Navin the point emerged that Hindu sages of the *smritis* have given inordinate importance to *vishesha* when they should have clearly recognized and depicted the obvious priority of the *samanya* over *vishesha*. Goyandka's thirty, Gandhi's eleven and Manu's ten virtues are all instances of *samanya dharma* to be followed by any and each human in any society. What a person has to do as a member of a group has to be in consonance with these universal obligations and not in addition or contravention to them. This is the point that Navin made and seemed quite germane to me.

The idea is that the *samanya* or universal *dharma* or moral demeanor is what marks a good and fit human being for oneself and for others in his or her field of interaction. It's to be both the foundation of a good society and the ground of enlightened individuality.

Sanatan: The point seems intuitively obvious to me but I am not sure if the sages have something in mind in not making it clear that *samanya* should take precedence over *vishesha* if tail is not going to wag the dog.

Navin: We can only guess, Sanatan. The virtues like temperance, truth, nonviolence and sincerity are too important to be made subservient to contingency and circumstance. If they are taken away as the basis, what will replace them as the basis?

Sanatan: You are right, Navin, because both the *shruti* and *smriti* often say that *satya*, for example, is the basis of *samsara* or the life-world. And, if we make *satya* itself subservient to *vishesha* or what happens to emerge as specific from time to time, we would indeed be left without a basis or seriously undermining it in the least. This would be counter to *shruti* and *smriti*, which state that *satya* or truth is the basis.

But my respect for the sages still makes me wonder if they had something in mind in not making it crystal clear that *samanya* is the dog and *vishesha* is only the tail. Their making a very large tail and leaving the corpus of the dog very small makes me curious.

Navin: Well, maybe the dialog among the sages has not survived or the texts talking about the dog in detail have not survived. I am confident that if we could talk to the sages, they would aver that the tail, however large, is not supposed to wag the dog.

Sanatan: Navin, you would recognize that, given my background and training as a conservative Hindu, it is not easy for me to jump out of the explicit and into the implicit. The explicit may be uncomfortable at times and the implicit may be quite tempting; but I am taught to stay the course and not jump the ship.

Navin: I understand your reluctance, Sanatan, but I also appreciate your struggle. If it helps you, I would point out that I have had occasions in my life when I jumped too hastily out of explicit into the implicit and very reluctantly had to crawl back into the fold. The price of maturity, I suppose.

Mahila: Quite intriguing, Navin. Would you mind sharing it with us?

Navin: Hmmm. Well, I'll eat that hat! My elder brother's daughter fell in love with a man of a caste very different from ours. In my reformist's zeal I went out of my way to support her choice and actually fought with my brother on her behalf to have him accept her choice. Marriage took place and fell apart within a year because the social adjustment in the new caste proved to be impossible for my niece. I was humiliated both within myself and by so many others who said "we told you so." Sometimes I feel I did the right thing but it did not work out. But right things are supposed to work out, aren't they?

Sanatan: I appreciate that candor, Navin. To tell the truth, I have had my share of experiences too. An uncle of mine, who is no more than a dozen years older than me, married a woman outside the caste. I criticized him strongly and predicted that the marriage won't last more than a few months. I am embarrassed to say that they are happily married even after twenty years of marriage. They made the necessary adjustments in a very skillful way. I am sure all of us, in all societies, grow up and become mature by paying some such price where our basic principles are challenged. Some hang on to the principles and some change drastically. Sevakji, what does your wisdom say in this matter?

Sevak: For what it's worth, my thinking is that we should settle at a place in our thinking where our *samanya dharma* or universal principles of relating with our relatives, friends, neighbors and even strangers are open ended, capable of absorbing a variety of *vishesha* or specific circumstances that life will throw at us. The more rigid our principles, the more unhappy we will be. Of course, this does not mean that we compromise the principles at every nook and corner. The principles

themselves should be such that they won't break us, like a strong storm breaks stiff trees. They should rather be malleable like grass that can survive a big gush of wind, by bending but not breaking. I have taken this page of learning from Lao Tzu's *Dao De Jing*.

Yes, principles are supposed to work in life, but they don't always do that. Becoming mature is picking up that lesson. To abandon them in face of failure does not make for wisdom either. Going always by the principles even when they do not work makes for an inner satisfaction. That is largely what we have called "moral fulfillment" which is our rendition of *dharma*. However, all said and done, a life that has nothing to show for happiness other than having done one's duty shows that something is amiss. Living a noble life is indeed great but it does not have to be a substitute for living a complete life. The Hindu complete life, accordingly, comprises not just moral fulfillment or *dharma* but also fulfillment of physical needs or *kama*, of social values or *artha* and, above all, of spiritual freedom or *moksha*.

One test in a tough situation is whether one's fidelity to a principle produces inner satisfaction to a person in face of strong turmoil inside and outside but renders no harm to others involved. If others involved become sufferers as a result of my holding up a principle which is giving me nothing more than inner fulfillment, it's time for me to reassess and adjust. My happiness cannot, in good conscience, come from making others unhappy, even if the happiness is of the "higher" inner kind.

Remember that the sages ask us to adjust in face of difficult *desha* or place, different *kala* or time and *apat* or trying circumstance. Relativizing the principles to these three means that we consider reality and not undermine peace and harmony around us in the zeal of upholding the principle. Of course principles should not be sacrificed at the drop of a hat. But if the question is whether rules are made for humans or humans for rules, I tend to hold the former. But on this very tough point, you can find examples and anecdotes in the Hindu literature that support both sides. For some comfort, there is an Upanishadic saying, if memory serves me right, which says that the essence of *dharma* is subtle and laid in a cave. Bhishma in the great epic *Maha-bharata* says that there are times when *satya* or truth becomes *asatya* or the wrong thing to say and *vice versa*. All this suggests caution against rigidity of principles and malleableness in view of the general good of people around us.

What do you say, Darshana?

Darshana: Sevakji, at the beginning of your response I was not sure where you were going, logically speaking. But you managed to elucidate

the issue without losing the integrity of the four values of the Hindu art of life.

As to my own wisdom, I have not reached a settled mature stage . . .

Sanskriti: In my case, Darshana, I would be quite unsettled if maturity falls on me without any effort on my part!

Darshana: Very interesting, Sanskriti. May you stay youthful forever! What I was going to say was that my commitment to logic comes in my way of maturing in the sense in which Sevakji just recommended it. Bending without breaking seems to be murky thinking, trying to have it both ways, making do with a living contradiction. I think of Socrates toward the end of Plato's *The Gorgias*. There, in a magnificent soliloquy Socrates declares that finding a self-contradiction in his mind would be like breaking himself in two pieces. Once you smell a self-contradiction you just can't live with it. I know I have to get out of this logocentricity. But calling it names does not work for me. It works wonders for some who then go around being illogical whenever they face a trouble and blame all the problems on logic. They say that life and logic simply don't mix. But as long as the Socrates in me is still alive and kicking, I have a hard time conjuring up ways that let me bend without breaking. Sorry about this, Sevakji. I didn't mean to criticize you so strongly.

Sevak: Oh, Darshana, my principles should be open ended enough to withstand your logical scrutiny. Without you putting my thought in logical order of at least a minimal kind I won't be able to show my face to anybody. You know I am not one of those who constantly bad-mouths logic in the name of life, religion, spirituality or anything that sounds grandiose in a *prima facie* way. It has been my effort, however, to recognize that the ultimate does include and transcend logic. But I am willing to conceive the ultimate in a way that is sufficiently open ended and involves the least transgression of logic.

Darshana: Sevakji, that is what I admire about you. You are not willing to jump over logic when a small logical difficulty emerges. That indeed would be the mark of cowardly thinking or rather absence of thinking. You always attempt to carve out the most logical possibility in a tight spot. But you do try to get out. My logic leaves me stuck without a good exit strategy.

Madhyama: Sevakji, Darshana, both of you form a great intellectual team. For all of us you form a primary source of inspiration, kind of like

our *shruti* and *smriti*. Now, don't ask me who is primary and who is auxiliary. I am not going to address that question. But, with your permission, I want to go further with my presentation.

Sevak, Darshana: Please, Madhyama.

Madhyama: Back to *samanya* or universal morality and its intuitive priority over *vishesha* or specific morality. I think we have everyone agreeing to the priority, with the caveat that Sanatan's agreement is somewhat reluctant. The point is that some later Hindu thinkers began to interpret the specific as having priority over the universal and, consequently, certain rigidity grew that did not facilitate the acceptance and growth of the universal as it should have been allowed to do.

This kind of tail wagging the dog has occurred in other religions too where obvious and intuitive priorities have been reversed over time. Daoism in China, which had a great simple mystical philosophy, came to be infested by a multitude of rituals. In Judaism, Talmudic details grew over the noble simplicity of the Ten Commandments. A plethora of diverse intellectual infighting eclipsed the four noble truths and middle eightfold path in Buddhism. The simple principle of all-encompassing love that Jesus recommended came to be undermined by endless theological debates including the question of how many angels can dance over the head of a pin. The humanistic spirituality of *jen* or selfless humanity in Confucius was undermined by a flood of excessive *li* or routine rituality giving way to feudalism and its attendant inequities.

In Hinduism *vishesha* or specific took over *samanya* or universal. The *smritis* spoke very little of the universal and nearly all discussions over its nature and cultivation were lost, while details of the specific proliferated beyond any rational measure. Hindu pandits engaged in laborious debates on *vyavahara-nirnaya* or decision making over pseudo-issues like whether a Hindu can travel overseas or eat with someone not belonging to his caste and so on.

Simple nobility, in sum, was overtaken by rigid complexity. This happened mainly because *vishesha* or specific was accorded a pride of place over *samanya* or universal. Thus it is that Hinduism came to be seen as a congeries of specific rules and regulations about daily activities within a caste-bound structure without the protective umbrella of *samanya*. But luckily at least in part this appearance was not all that was to reality. The spiritual core was hardly lost at any stage and it is because of that core, together with the other three traditional values of life, that the Hindu identity is still alive, cognizable and can be reconfigured for a moderate Hinduism for Today.

Did I ruffle too many feathers with this mini-lecture?

Anish: Every major religion, which has lasted for millennia, has had its ups and downs. Maturity consists in picking up the pieces where one finds them and then rearranging them together with whatever needs to be fixed. We are engaged in that task and should not think that Hinduism is blameless and all its problems are caused by aliens. Let us honestly see the pieces as we can and go from there. I think Madhyama is doing a fine job, with good logic and excellent foundations or guiding principles.

Sanatan: Of course all this is not what I am used to hear or tolerate. But it will be better for the solidity of my own thinking to look at the resulting sixteen foundations as a whole and then decide if I can go along with them. Are the sages going to come out as bearers of inspirational truth or of pernicious doctrine?

Mahila: I will hold out until I see how women are going to fare as part of the sixteen-fold structure. If they are going to be subservient to men, it won't be very encouraging. I must confess that Madhyama makes sense so far at least and I found myself with her on almost all steps.

Sanskriti: A period of relative decadence in the history of Hinduism is not something that I cannot live with. Is there anyone who has lived up to be fifty and has never fallen sick? Progress does not consist in never stumbling but in getting up and going again after stumbling. If we acknowledge and recognize the malady and take appropriate steps to get out of it, we will have progressed.

Just taking pride in being a Hindu is not my cup of tea. I am here to find out exactly what it is that I can be proud of in Hinduism. It is unintelligent self-deception and rhetorical self-ignorance to say one is proud of Hinduism when one cannot clearly articulate what Hinduism is. I am afraid it sounds amusing to non-Hindus.

I am confident that Madhyama's sixteen foundations as a set are indeed something highly worthwhile and to be justly proud of. I look forward to being really proud of a Hinduism that I can understand and explain in considerable detail. That is the purpose of my participation in this seminar; I am on the way to achieving my goal; nothing has indicated otherwise so far.

Darshana: Madhyama, you showed restraint, candor, knowledgeability added to power of coherent thinking. I have a hard time finding

significant self-contradictions in your mini-lecture. Good job so far. Finish it.

Sevak: Your responses to Madhyama's mini-lecture have been almost universally positive. And I have to concur with their gist. I heard nothing that is significantly negative. Madhyama, you deserve the positive accolade over your presentation. Particularly, I like the way you pointed out how virtually all major religions had undergone massive changes of the type that Hinduism went through. Your examples were on the point and well taken. They illustrated the point. They showed how Hinduism is not alone in going through such travails of a metamorphosis. Probably a case can be made that these cognate transformations in world religions exhibit common deeply laid features of the dynamics of social life in human history.

Of course individual circumstances are different in each case of metamorphosis in the history of world religions. But the point is well taken. Philosophers of history should spend more time understanding and explaining the dynamics of these metamorphoses. But as far as our project with Hinduism is concerned, you have presented an exemplary case. I am heartened by it and am sure that the sixteen foundations as a set will come out very positively as well.

Madhyama: Thank you, all. The group has been kind and considerate with my approach, findings and configurations. I sense and understand some reservations, qualifications and hesitations which, I believe, will be considerably neutralized by the totality of the sixteen features of the whole architectonic.

Let me wind up the description of the five sources first. After that I will indicate the general caricature of the sixteen-fold Hinduism, showing the network of interconnection of the concepts involved. The caricature will show the placement and use I am going to make of the distinction and priority between *samanya* or universal on the one hand and *vishesha* or particular on the other. Their weaving in the structure is important to grasp the totality and vitality of the coherence of the whole.

Navin: Madhyama, I am anxious to get to the structure and its sixteen constituents. Let us go over the rest of the sources very briefly.

Madhyama: You may be right, Navin, in under-assessing the significance of the sources. For, naming the categories and sub-categories of the sources will perhaps not advance us toward conceptual comprehension of

the foundations of moderate Hinduism I envisage. Let me go over them briefly and see if there is demand for greater details.

Sevak: That makes sense, Madhyama.

Madhyama: Thanks, Sevakji. The point about *samanya* or universal and *vishesha* or particular arose out of the analysis of the source known as the *smritis* or what I called the auxiliary revelations. Moving on, the third source of Hinduism is *itihasa* or exemplary history, the fourth is *purana* or synoptic digests and the fifth is *darshana* or metaphysical visions.

Itihasa or exemplary history is mainly the two great epics called the *Ramayana* and the *Maha-bharata*, the former narrating the exemplary life story of God incarnate Rama and the latter recounting the story of another full incarnation of God, called Krishna, helping the Pandavas win the great war against the evil Duryodhana. *Ramayana* was composed by the sage Valmiki who also was the first poet of classical Sanskrit. Mahabharata was written by the sage Vyasa.

Itihasa literally means "this is how it happened." Let us not think, however, that it means a lifeless chronology of political and military events achieved through some historiography of authenticated documents or literal evidence. The purpose of *itihasa* is to draw lessons that can be applied to ethical and spiritual life. In lieu of calling it exemplary history one may call it existential history or narrative for life. This is what the narratives in the epics hold for the general populace as well as for the learned elite: an exemplary source of moral and spiritual inspiration.

History as a mechanical anecdote of political and military chronology is something that occupies a very low value for the Hindus. We have alluded to this before. Westerners for whom history is the epitome of understanding the universe have a hard time with the Hindu neglect of their kind of history. Under their influence some copycat Hindus try to fit Hinduism in a Western ilk of merely chronological history. The result of such misdirected historicism is a distorted view of Hinduism. Hindu thought and spirituality can best be understood through their own values and categories, of which chronologic placement of people and events holds only a negligible significance.

The Hindu *itihasa* envisages wonder, awe, entertainment as well as literary and aesthetic enjoyment, besides being a readily intelligible source of inspiration at the moral and spiritual levels. The epics make great poetry and masterful literature. They include a good deal of material generally useful for life because their basic aim is to enhance the quality of life for the individual as well as the culture. The Rama epic

shows the exemplary way in which God lived and suffered when he became a man called Rama. Krishna of the Mahabharata epic gave the Hindus and the entire universe the eternal message of the *Bhagavad-gita* with its philosophy made highly accessible to the people at large.

Mahila: Madhyama, your words echo the feelings with which we grew up through our Hindu childhood where we imbibed Hinduism through the epic stories narrated by street bards and other gifted musicians and dramatists. We never thought of them as mere chronicles or sheer ghosts of the past. Chronology may be painstakingly accurate but it is barren and pointless from the perspective of enhancing, inspiring and enriching the life of the people. Western religions envision God acting in history to redeem humanity and that can certainly inspire the people. But when you take God out of that equation you are left will little meaning in merely amassing chronologic details.

Darshana: Mahila, you have a potent insight. There is a branch of philosophy called history of philosophy. As can be expected, it is mainly cultivated in Western academia. One major question for discussion in it is whether history has meaning and if so what is the nature of that meaning. Philosophers of history are divided on the issue. Analytical historians in their philosophy tend toward history having little or no meaning, while speculative philosophy of history infected by legacy from religion continues to assign one or the other kind of meaning to history.

Incidentally, I want us to note that there has been a noted historian called Arnold Toynbee who wrote a massive multi-volume work called *A Study of History* where he traced and documented remarkable uniformity in the development, degeneration and demise of civilizations in world history. His surmises on Hindu civilization are very fair and friendly, standing out from the routine supercilious stereotypes emanating from Western academia and media. It is no wonder that Toynbee did not receive favorable notice from the analytical wing of the philosophy of history. But he did proffer a view where Western civilization was seen as peaking and slowly decaying while Indian civilization would emerge as a world leader.

Sanskriti: Darshana, his prophesy may yet come true!

Anish: Thank you, Darshana, for this very interesting little detour. I want to resume the thread on *itihasa*, though. I came not to believe in a personal God. Yet, the high place I have in my heart for Rama and

Krishna, inspired by their examples properly understood as narrated by the bards in my childhood cannot be compared with a creed based in merely regarding a certain person as having historically existed. There is no glory in mere historical existence. Glory belongs to a narrative, even mythical, when it is able to inspire the hearts and minds of people. In light of this I note with amusement attempts of people who say that their religion is superior because its miracles are events that happened in the so-called history as a ghost of the past.

Madhyama: I note the group's comments with a thankful attitude. I will move on to *puranas* or synoptic digests now. There are eighteen of them, all written in verse and including religious, philosophical, spiritual, cosmogonic, liturgical and various other matters. Chronologies of kings and sages are included as well as brief treatises in grammar, prosody, rituals, entertaining stories and anecdotes. Very interestingly, the sage Vyasa is the traditional author of all the *puranas*, besides being the one who wrote the great epic *Maha-bharata.* There is speculation among recent Hindu thinkers that Vyasa is not a single person but represents an honorific that was passed on from sage to sage within a certain line of distinguished prodigious writers.

Each *purana* is named after a particular god, goddess or sage. Thus there is a purana named after Shiva, Vishnu, Narada, Markendeya and so on. The god or goddess at the center of a particular *purana* is extolled as the highest form of divinity and all other gods are regarded as its particular forms or manifestations. Vyasa being the author of all the *puranas* is thus seen as a true believer in many ways to conceive the name, form and even the concept of the divinity.

Sanskriti: This supports one of the defining features of moderate Hinduism, namely, that the spiritual being underlying the entire universe can be regarded or described in many ways.

Madhyama: Indeed, Sanskriti. Also, again, let me point out that scholars, especially of the Westernized ilk, constantly dispute and endlessly debate the dates and authorship of each *purana*, let alone the veracity of the narratives described there. As I said before, for a typical traditional Hindu these are unedifying quibbles and won't tell us much about how to live an inspired life even if they get miraculously resolved. The punditry and sophistry involved in this professed erudition can be a lifelong source of livelihood for academics. The enormous labor and industry involved are misplaced but are best ignored by a Hindu who wants to lead a morally and spiritually inspired life. Some of the academics that

profess such scholarship secretly live a near-traditional Hindu life. All the same they continue to pay lip service to their Westernized academic vocation's baseless stance.

Anish: Some servile mind!

Sanatan: Madhyama, I know a few Westernized scholars who in their private lives live the life of traditional Hindus.

Anish: I know a few scientists who believe in Christian God and his creating the world literally in six days. They are good professionals in public life but are "good" Christians in private life.

Mahila: I know a woman who got a Ph.D. in sociology from a Western university. She wrote a scathing critique of the caste system to get an easy Ph.D. She then used her Ph.D. to enhance her prospects of finding a better bridegroom of her own caste. She had the last laugh when she married her choice within her caste. She is happily married now after about twenty years.

Navin: Mahila, I know who you are talking about. But I want to elicit this from you. How do you know she is happy?

Mahila: She had a mischievous twinkle in her eye when she narrated this story to me twenty years ago. I saw her about a month ago and she retold the story with the same mischievous twinkle. Only a hopeless historiographer would need a documentary proof of her marital happiness.

Navin: So much for historicism in method. Sorry, Madhyama, go ahead with your five sources.

Madhyama: I enjoyed the aside. The fifth and the final source is called *darshana*, which means vision of reality. Tradition recognizes six systems of metaphysical vision in Hinduism. They are called *sankhya* or dualistic distinctionism, *yoga* or meditative spirituality, *nyaya* or logical realism, *vaisheshika* or atomistic pluralism, *mimamsa* or linguistic ritualism and *vedanta* or spiritual mysticism. *Sankhya* was traditionally enunciated by the sage Kapila, *yoga* by Patanjali, *nyaya* by Gautama, *vaisheshika* by Kanada, *mimamsa* by Jaimini and *vedanta* by Badarayana. Our own Darshana has given me many more details if you would like me to go into them.

Darshana: May be some other time, Madhyama, even as I'd love those details. The group looks anxious to get into the sixteen ingredients of your moderate Hinduism.

Madhyama: Let us start with our four defining principles. They are: one spiritual being underlying the universe, many ways to speak about it, many ways to reach it in experience and accountability for one's actions. We can enunciate these in appropriate expanded formulations to each one's liking and taste for language. If indeed there are many ways to speak about the one spiritual being, there can be many ways to speak about the Hindu defining principles bringing in a wonderful diversity without in any way jeopardizing the central core of the defining principles. Given the open-ended nature of the four principles we can let our moral conscience and spiritual aptitude guide ourselves to articulate any formulation that we find inspirational. This way we can build diversity and richness in and around the very core of Hindu thought and spirituality, paving the way for a veritable cosmopolitan Hinduism that would be adaptable in a variety of contexts and circumstances.

Sanatan: I do not want to interrupt your chain of thought, Madhyama. But am I allowed to throw in a comment?

Madhyama: I will have to hold my thought horses somewhat, but I should not restrain you or anyone in the group from expressing their thought on the subject.

Sanatan: Thank you, Madhyama. Your liberality and generosity of respectful tolerance of variations on the matter may lead to an inappropriate dilution of the core principles. We should not encourage a great deal of compromising of the basic principles, or should we?

Madhyama: Sanatan, you are making an important point.

Anish: I want to say something here, if I may. The open-ended nature of the core appeals to me because it seems, for example, to enable endorsement of the one spiritual being as personal by someone and as impersonal by another. If we insist on one way of speaking about the central being, we will have to say good-bye to a lot of people with divergent conceptions of the being.

Sanatan: Well, we are already limiting the ways of speaking about it by saying that it is one and it is spiritual.

Madhyama: We have both primary and auxiliary revelations supporting the oneness and spirituality of the central being. Too, we have both types of revelations speaking about it as personal and featured at times and impersonal and featureless at other times. We need a structure that can house both these aspects in a coherent manner. The defining four principles are designed to do that and, really, to do that as an authentic and defining feature of Hinduism rather than something that is thrown in as an expedient.

Sanatan: Thank you, Madhyama and Anish. I think I see the point. It is that we must articulate authentic defining features with sufficient specificity but leave the articulation open at the same time to accommodate long existing diversity and richness in Hindu thought and spirituality.

Darshana: I am proud of Sanatan. He has shown a keen ability to be guided by reason rather than emotion on this issue.

Sanatan: I appreciate it, Darshana. At some point our association with you is going to pay off!

Sevak: I am sure that we will keep Darshana's reason too in some form of check and balance, bringing it down to adjust with positive human emotions?

Darshana: I am counting on the group to do that; thank you all in advance!

Madhyama: Resolving the conflict between positive emotions and necessary reason can be excruciatingly difficult. I am glad I am not into that; at least not for now any way.

Sanskriti: Eventually we may make you to face it, Madhyama, to extract the best out of you if not for anything else.

Madhyama: Looks like everyone here is going to be tried and tested in some important way. But I believe it will be for his or her good and also for the group's good. If anything happens beyond the group in the wide world outside, that will be icing on the cake.

Anish: I am eager to go beyond the four defining features of moderate Hinduism. For, I have already anticipated the four. The nature of the dozen other features is what intrigues me at this point.

Madhyama: At this point I need help from the group. It is about sequencing the sixteen. As I said before, they fall into four categories of four principles each. Putting the defining features on top makes logical sense inasmuch as everything else can be said to derive from or depend on the defining four at least in some way. But even here I contend with myself whether I should put logic ahead of what may have general appeal.

Of course now I got to reveal . . .

Sanatan: I am all ears, Madhyama. I am on the verge of a revelation. This will be my *shruti* or primary revelation, hearing from you directly.

Navin: Hey, Sanatan, we are all in the same boat. Can't let only conservatives make off with *shruti* or direct primary revelation!

Madhyama: Guys, guys, this is no revelation and I am not a revealer. There is an element of suspense but I am going to tell you largely what I already got from you when I had conversations about moderate Hinduism with you people. But, without much ado, let me briefly indicate the categories so that you can guide me on their sequencing.

The sixteen points based on *shruti*, *smriti*, *itihasa*, *purana* and *darshana* are divided in four categories of which the four defining principles comprise one category. Another category comprises the four major values of Hindu life. No surprise there, I guess. Yet another category is the distillation of *samanya dharma* or universal virtues into four cardinal virtues. It's like condensing Goyandka's forty and Gandhi's eleven and compressing them into just four. If Gandhi is understood to really have only two major items in his repertoire, namely, *satya* or truth and *ahimsa* or nonviolence, then the four are a modest expansion. The four really come from Swami Sivananda's book called *All About Hinduism*. They include Gandhi's two and add *dama* or self-restraint and *shuchi* or purification.

The last or fourth category is a composite of certain salient principles that the Hindu tradition has developed through its unique journey of religious and spiritual experience. Some interpretation is involved in culling them down to four and in articulating them in the form I have ultimately reached, benefitting from my discussions with Sevakji, Darshana and others in the group. This is how I want to line up

the sixteen in front of you and they are ready to be sequenced. My main strife is this. The four defining principles logically should come at the beginning. For, they conceptually initiate everything, so to say, and stand like the source of the other twelve elements. On the other hand, they perhaps do not make a great opening for a presentation. The sixteen as a whole are going to be part of the central presentation after all for not just moderate Hinduism but for Hinduism for Today as well. Hence, the beginning of the presentation should occur with something that has an eye- or ear-catching appeal at the outset. The four salient principles can wait till the end, like a worthy finale. So, it's a competition between the four *purusharthas* or values of life and the four *samanya dharmas* or universal virtues, unless of course you want to put the four-fold definition at the beginning.

Darshana: As you people can expect, my rational mind would put the four defining principles at the beginning and let the rest sort of derive from them. But I am merely one in the group of eight and I am sure I won't have many sympathizers on this issue. Or, do I?

Anish: No, Darshana, sorry, I will vote for the four major values to go first, followed by the four virtues. Definition can come next, with the salient principles left for the end. I think this sequence will make for the best general appeal to people who we will be approaching after all. We need to make the entire package as attractive and appealing as possible. Madhyama is right in seeking our counsel on the sequencing.

Mahila: I support Anish's proposal. The four values of life at the beginning at once tell anyone that we are looking at a comprehensive philosophy of life, incorporating four core values or really universal features of all mature civilizations in the world. The four virtues following right away convey our shortened version of the Ten Commandments, so to say. They tell us how Hinduism plans to achieve the four values, namely, by developing the four virtues. Do others have different ideas?

Sanskriti: I am kind of trained to think of things on commercial lines. This is not, strictly speaking, business, nor is it a sales job. But we have to be practical in this wide world, which is more than a sheer logical arrangement. Sorry, Darshana, but here we part. I support Anish's proposal.

Navin: I am sorry I have to apply my reformist's hammer to shape the sequencing of our generic, default or template presentation. Darshana of course means well but defining principles at the outset can be too heavy for the Tom, Dick and Harry of the main street. I go along with Anish.

Sanatan: It looks like the salient principles should be the ones to bring out the Hindu tradition in terms of its unique development and manifestation. My personal preference, therefore, would be to put them at the very beginning. But I see the group think the way it is going. I won't fight it. I would accord a primacy to the four virtues rather than the four values. But then I may be showing too conservative a hand for what is involved. I won't even mind the definition to start the entire presentation. Thinking about the whole matter as I can put it together in my mind, I find myself trending toward Anish's proposal.

Darshana: I see the handwriting on the wall, and you know what I mean. Let me throw my weight on Anish's proposal. After all, logic and philosophy are not the only thing in life. And this is no hemlock.

Sevak: Darshana is a good sport and also a good philosopher. She never goes along the party lines, so to say, and often plays a maverick role even in her own professional interactions with her colleagues. She always calls the shots as she sees them. And she usually sees pretty well. I clearly see what she is coming from in initially supporting the four defining principles to open the presentation. Besides the general appeal of opening with something lifelike and not abstract, opening with a caricature of a philosophy of life should not be unattractive even philosophically.

Darshana: Sevakji, the last point you make makes me to shed all my reservations about the sequencing. I am with the group whole-heartedly.

All: Thanks and welcome, Darshana!

Madhyama: Great! Now, the foundations of a moderate Hinduism or, in other words, a Hinduism for Today are sixteen and, distributed over four categories, they go like this: 1. Values of life, 2. Universal virtues of human relationships, 3. Defining principles and 4. Salient standpoints. Each category has four ingredients. Let me go ahead to narrate them briefly. We will expand them suitably to turn each into a brief, pointed but clear statement as we discuss them.
Values of life:

1. Physical needs, called *kama*
2. Social values, called *artha*
3. *Dharma* or moral fulfillment
4. *Moksha* or spiritual freedom

Universal virtues of human relationships:

5. Self-restraint or *dama*
6. Truthfulness or *satya*
7. Nonviolence or *ahimsa*
8. Self-purification or *shuchi*

Defining principles:

9. One spiritual being
10. Many ways of speaking about it
11. Many ways of reaching it
12. *Karma* or accountability for actions

Salient standpoints:

13. Universal is enriched by relative
14. Ethical is anchored in spiritual
15. Ultimate is within and beyond
16. Ineffable can be symbolized by monism or dualism

That's all, folks!

Sevak: Madhyama, let me be the first to congratulate you on a fine accomplishment. Already we have variously expressed our appreciation of the commendable work you have done in gathering the Hindu wisdom for today's age and organizing it in as accessible a language as accuracy can bear. I propose that we promptly commence our discussion of your sixteen. Let us go alphabetically and narrate our points of comment that will help us expand each of the sixteen foundational items into a suitable self-contained statement. In our comment we should avoid raising issues that we have already discussed.

Anish: Sevakji, I see the point in not raising old concerns and getting into rehashing them needlessly. For one thing, we have resolved many issues to our satisfaction. A few that are unresolved, partly or completely, should be left alone. Let me focus my comments accordingly.

I suggest we should have a general introduction to the entire list of sixteen foundation blocks and a suitable general ending to complete it. We also should have an introduction to each of the four categories. An ending statement for each category is perhaps not as necessary, hence I will leave it for us to decide as we approach the categories.

Darshana: Anish's proposal will go a long way in giving the entire presentation a solid logical look of coherence and completeness. The unit will also stand out as an integrated and self-contained piece, not to speak of its remarkable comprehensiveness, which should be obvious to any thoughtful person.

Sevak: I believe that Madhyama already has a caricature of the introductory and ending statements that Anish has so wisely proposed.

Madhyama: Yes, I have them but I want to absorb the group's comments before finalizing them.

Anish: Thank you, Madhyama. My tendencies toward humanism, naturalism and secularism, such as they survive, are adequately reflected in Madhyama's list as a whole. Hinduism here comes out without any sort of sectarian, denominational or cultish encumbrances and immediately forces the reader to focus on the wide-open affirmations of a Hindu's deeper and inner credo. Hopefully, anyone afflicted by the stereotypical negative focusing such as cows, castes and curry will be suitably dissuaded to raise them as issues of substance. At this point, I would rather let someone pick this up and move it further.

Darshana: Let me take my turn now. Since the entire piece sounds very happily like a well-rounded philosophy of life rather than a congeries of historically handed out dogmas, I suggest that the Hindu view of life may briefly be incorporated as part of the general introduction. Sevakji and I have for some time converged upon a little working description, if not a strict definition, of life from the Hindu viewpoint.

Madhyama: Darshana, I do recall you alluding to it. It's time for you and Sevakji to reveal it to us?

Sevak: Let me state the narration and have Darshana explain its subtle nuances. From the Hindu viewpoint, life is a movement of consciousness toward fulfillment. That's it. No need for high-end pedantry or sophistication. But, yes, there are nuances and supporting reasons. Darshana can do a better job on that than I can.

Darshana: The simplicity and brevity of this view of life is deceptive. You have to think deep to see what it accomplishes. It is far from a biologically accurate notion of life and it does not even attempt to be

"scientific." Indeed, any attempt to catch life scientifically is likely to be a nefarious form of scientism rather.

Anish: True, as a scientist I can vouch for it.

Darshana: Thanks, Anish. The other benefit of Sevakji's way of putting life is its comprehensiveness. It is truly inclusive and may even seem to include too much and not all it includes can be good either. But we all know that life can throw all kinds of curves at us. There is no dearth of surprise when you are living an actual life. As they say, truth is stranger than fiction. That can apply to life too. So, in that sense Sevakji's idea is realistic. Then it focuses on consciousness which is what brings it close to the Hindu view that spiritual being pervades everything and goes even beyond all that we can sense or conceive.

It takes life as it is lived, that is, existentially. It tends to describe life existentially as it is felt and lived without pedantic interpretation or explanation. To explain life would be like killing it, like explaining a joke. So, laying it out in the open, which is what it does, does justice to its existentiality. The pithy statement, which is a marvel of brevity, endorses common sense too. It very wisely bypasses any and all social science baggage, which would be more like explaining life away rather than narrating its felt essence. It does not overpromise by saying it accomplishes this or that wondrous goal. It is content with asserting that life is a movement toward fulfillment. Whether fulfillment is actually achieved and, if so, in what form, quality or quantity is also not pontificated.

Further, telling like it is, it does justice to life as it phenomenologically presents itself in its bare form. One can fill in all kinds of movement toward all kinds of fulfillment. Really speaking that is what a human living unit does all the time. Trying to describe or prescribe kinds of movement or fulfillment would fill volumes that would never be complete in any sense. So the freedom and openness of life are clearly implied and understood.

Sevakji's formulation about life may be seen to overflow Hinduism to encompass all life in general. But that won't be a problem or raise an issue. For, then it shows that the Hindu view of life is the true view, which embraces life in its universal form. Sevakji's articulation of the Hindu view of life includes all ways of moving toward fulfillment. It includes moving toward but not reaching fulfillment. It shows that one is logically dead if one loses all hope for any fulfillment in life. Finally, it includes terminal fulfillment, which is called *moksha* in Hinduism and is rendered as "spiritual freedom" in Madhyama's presentation. The view

shows that such terminal fulfillment, if and when reached, would be the logical, but of course not the physical, end of life.

Sanskriti: Just five words about life can package so much is incredible to me.

Sanatan: Reminds me of the *sutra* style in which the sages wrote all kinds of treatises.

Navin: Sanatan, how is the word *sutra* translated in English?

Sanatan: Aphorism.

Mahila: Any way you look at it, the five-word definition or working description of life should be called a gem.

Darshana: So, we seem to agree that Sevakji's Hindu life formula should be a part of Madhyama's introduction to her template presentation of a Hinduism for Today.

Sevak: Darshana, I like that you put the article "a" in front of the phrase Hinduism for Today. We do not want to suggest that our version of Hinduism for Today is the only one possible or desirable.

Darshana: Thank you, Sevakji, for noticing that. It is surely not our intention to claim exclusivity for our Hinduism for Today.

Madhyama: Right. Sevakji, why do we not make your Hindu life formula one of the foundations of Hinduism in our template presentation?

Sevak: It should rather be a part of introduction to the four major values of life. It will fit there very logically. We do not wish to appropriate what belongs to the whole world of humanity as if it is a typical preserve of Hinduism. The statement about life, after all, encompasses human life in general, not just Hindu life.

Madhyama: I see a touch of modesty and generosity in Sevakji's proposal. What do you think, Darshana, about overriding Sevakji for a change?

Darshana: I won't mind overriding Sevakji if his modesty was the only thing coming in the way. But he persuades me by pointing out that the formula on life fits very logically in front of the category of four values of life.

Madhyama: Fine, then I will put it there. What should go in the general introduction to the presentation as a whole?

Sevak: If the group agrees, the general introduction should address itself to the world at large. Not just Hindus, nor just non-Hindus, but all in general. It should point out the difficulty in defining Hinduism and making a point that it contains a definition of Hinduism. The introduction should show the relevance of our effort. It should briefly state what we are going to do in the presentation, that is, the general plan of the presentation. Let us leave the matter of language and the rest to Madhyama's discretion, for she has been doing a great job at that and has proved herself equal to the task.

Darshana: I concur, as it will be relieved of my persistent tinkering in the name of logic!

Sanskriti: Darshana, we know you always overflow with intellectual energy but we want you to have some time relaxing, enjoying and witnessing what happens in the world without you. Then, when we cannot figure it out, we will call on you.

Darshana: Or, you will find me jumping in when you wrongly think you have figured it out!

Madhyama: You are always welcome, Darshana.

Sevak: The four sets of four categories each should find their own brief introductions too. These introductions should summarily talk about the category in general and prepare the reader for the four items in the category. At the very end we need to recount very briefly what we have done, enter a plea for giving it serious thought, show our openness to comments and suggestions for further improvement and make a statement of universal benediction.

Anish: Sounds like a plan, Sevakji. Thank you. But I would like Madhyama to tell us more about how she plans to fill in short

descriptions of each item in the group of sixteen, because we still have some that are not clear to me, being not discussed by us so far.

Madhyama: Very true, Anish. Shows well that we are not done yet. Sevakji just provided a detailed blueprint for the general introduction. Let us take a look at each category before going into the items individually. The first category pertains to the *purusharthas* or objects of human effort, what we call the major values of Hindu life. I think the category introduction here can talk about the comprehensiveness of the set of four values as a whole, for the four together embrace four important areas of life goals explored by humans in general in their history and development. The introduction can add how the four also are well balanced and provide an all-round satisfaction to an individual. Finally, we can say how the sages thought that providing opportunity to all toward pursuing and attaining the four values is the collective goal for the human society. Any comments?

Darshana: Looks good, Madhyama, I see nobody wanting to make further suggestions for improvement. Feels like we are approaching a state where we are ready for the final version to emerge from Madhyama's pen.

Madhyama: Thank you, group, for your trust in my pen. We have covered the four values in our discussion quite a bit. So, I will proceed to the introduction to the next category, namely, universal virtues of human relationships.

Mahila: Madhyama, not that I don't like the category title. In fact I appreciate it intuitively. But presumably this is about *samanya dharma* or general aspects of what we have termed moral fulfillment. I want to know the context of human relationships fitting in here.

Sanskriti: I need to know that too.

Sevak: Let me jump in here, for I am the one responsible for the phrasing of the title. Darshana, Madhyama and I have discussed this. This grew out of their asking me how the word *dharma* is derived linguistically or, to be more particular, etymologically. I replied that it comes from the Sanskrit root *dhri* which means "to support," leading to the notion oft repeated in Hindu literature that *dharma* means that which supports.

Darshana and Madhyama persisted, asking what is it that *dharma* is supposed to support. All I could think of in answer is that *dharma*

supports *samsara* or the orderly world of human interaction that keeps moving and rotating before our eyes. At this point, Darshana queried how *dharma* as moral fulfillment would support that. We got to make sense of the concept of support in relation to the world and connect the two ideas of world and support in a sensible manner. You all know how Darshana hates to leave matters in a vague state of affairs!

Darshana: You can say that again, Sevakji. When I cannot remove vagueness on something, I still want to be clear about precisely what it is that remains vague and why. Going for the jugular on clarity, even as now I have come to see that clarity is not everything, is one of the occupational hazards of being a philosopher. So, when some philosophers engage in vague statements, I get doubly angry! I cannot stand my own people flouting one of the basic requirements in philosophizing. This has led to many a tense moment for me at some of my professional conferences. But, go on, Sevakji.

Sevak: So, you can imagine my delight when Darshana endorsed one of my aged intuitions on the matter. I had felt for a long time that what *dharma* supports is the whole world of human interactions and, therefore, the web of human interrelationships. In the famous Purusha hymn of the *Rig-veda*, the cosmos is described as an organic unit, as a macro individual so to say. Similarly *dharma* can be understood basically as the support of our world of human relationships.

I was able to reach greater clarity on my intuition with Darshana's help. It emerged that *samanya* or universal virtues are best understood as what every individual should imbibe in order to promote, bring about and sustain his or her relationships with others at a level where the relations are meaningful and fulfilling to all who are involved. That is why sages left the area of *samanya dharma* or universal virtues to *antar-atman* or the inner self or conscience and not to the dictates of any external authority. On the other hand, when it came down to specific areas of societal fulfillment, for example the relationship between the governing and the governed, they laid down specific rules for both parties, with the *rishis* or sages as arbiters in cases of doubt or dispute. Here a sage, because of his or her life of total dedication to public service has become virtually the conscience of the people, with no ax to grind and nothing but the good of people at heart.

The upshot is that, as discussed earlier, we still need to regard *samanya* as the dog and *vishesha* as its useful tail, which should not be allowed to wag the dog as has happened in the past. But *samanya* is to be understood as every individual's fair share of burden to humanity as a

whole whereby the individual contributes good will that supports meaningful and fulfilling relationships in one's life through his or her incorporation of certain essential virtues. These are to be common virtues that everyone is expected to imbibe so that society will become a wonderful web of human relationships that are mutually meaningful and individually satisfying to all in the society.

Just what are these essential virtues that all should learn and exhibit? Here the sages differed. The *Bhagavad-gita* in chapter 16, verses 1-3 lays this down as a set of twenty-six virtues, calling it *daivi sampat* or divine wealth. The *Bhagavata-purana* lists thirty qualities. Manu has the famous ten, which we have incorporated in Madhyama's 108-word summary of Hinduism. Yajnavalkya, another sage, has a list of eight. Goyandka, presented by Sanatan, has forty. Gandhi presented by Navin has eleven. Swami Sivananda has a goodly set of four: *dama* or self-restraint, *satya* or truthfulness, *ahimsa* or nonviolence and *shuchi* or purity.

I think for this day and age the set of four due to Swami Sivananda's book called *All About Hinduism* should serve our purposes well. It is small enough to manage and large enough to include what is involved. It is also balanced because *dama* and *shuchi* relate to individual's inner development while *satya* and *ahimsa* pertain to how one should treat others. A good relationship, which is the basic issue here, involves both individual's own inner preparation to enter into relationship and his or her desire to treat others adequately to make for the proper atmosphere and ground for the relationship to take roots and grow.

To cut the long story short, this is the background for the phrasing in Madhyama's rendering of *samanya dharma* as "universal virtues of human relationship." When an individual enters into meaningful and fulfilling relationships, he or she obtains a deep sense of satisfaction. We have called this feeling by the term "moral fulfillment" before. I think we have touched this matter before in another context somewhat but it bears repetition here and also a fresh formulation as an important piece in our articulation of the category of *samanya dharma*.

Is this enough of a lecture? Sorry for the long-winded speech. I hope it was worth it.

Sanatan: Sevakji, this gives me a profound insight into the nature of *dharma*, which we take for granted and maybe feel intuitively but never get to articulate it so clearly. You and Darshana deserve our gratitude for bringing this out.

Navin: I have very similar feelings. Samanya dharma is timeless and we see now how it truly deserves the designation *sanatana dharma* or eternal religion. We see why Tagore accorded it the status of *manava dharma* or human religion that extends to all humans and provides them a deeper dimension of fulfillment in life. At the same time it enhances the quality of everyone's life as it goes about developing meaningful and fulfilling relationships all around the society.

Mahila: If all individuals internalize these universal virtues, there would be heaven on the earth.

Sanskriti: I am sort of speechless. I want to throw all my support to Mahila.

Anish: *Samanya dharma* as enunciated is purely human, humanistic and non-dogmatic in concept. If it is understood in its true nature it can go a long way in complementing the much-ballyhooed talk about human rights. After all, the talk of human rights pits one group against another, if not individual against another, making for much needless strife. If *samanya dharma* is offered as a complement to the rights, being the duties of all humans to internalize and contribute for one's own and everybody's sake, a great environment of friendship and congeniality can take root in our midst. I never thought Hinduism can be so noble as to benefit humanity as a whole in such clear and impartial way.

Madhyama: Thank you, Sevakji, again for such an edifying statement. I would like Darshana to say a few words about the four virtues or qualities.

Darshana: I want to make two points. One is about virtue ethics. The other ties the four virtues into a coherent whole.

Previously we talked about consequentialist and deontological types of moral philosophy. Consequentialist ethics or moral philosophy maintains that rightness of an action issues from the value produced as a consequence of the action involved. Very differently, deontological ethics is non-consequentialist, holding that an action is right not because it may produce or result in some consequences that may be very commendable and desirable. In its view it is right precisely because it is the right thing to do. You do not speak the truth because it may benefit someone some day. You speak the truth because you just must, that being the right thing to do. Let the chips fall where they may. We should not engage in barter in ethical behavior. It is a commercial mind-

set to condition moral truth on manufacturing what we desire. It is desire itself that needs to be controlled, so that we may act in accordance with what we ought to do.

Consequentialists reply saying that if speaking the truth is not going to benefit anybody in a particular class of situations and, on the contrary, is likely to hurt a number of people, only a rigid doctrinaire will insist on speaking the so-called truth. So, the real determinant is the actual consequences and not an empty notion of rightness in somebody's mind. After all, rules are made for humans and not humans for rules. Moreover, consequences are publicly observable and hence verifiable, while intuition of rightness may arbitrarily differ from person to person or group to group.

Sanskriti: Darshana, my mind is reeling in a forceful whirl of a dilemma. Is there a way out of this terrible bind?

Sanatan: I remember the case of Yudhi-shthira in the great epic *Maha-bharata*. It so well brings out the point Darshana has made.

Mahila: Tell us, Sanatan, how you see it. That will provide a good example case to understand what Darshana is saying.

Darshana: Sanatan, go ahead. But be brief.

Sanatan: I will be brief. Yudhi-shthira, the moral hero of the epic, was a truth addict. He took a vow to tell the truth regardless of what harm it may cause him. In the battlefield between good and evil forces he of course was on the side of the good while his erstwhile teacher, called Drona, was fighting for the side of the evil Duryodhana. One day in the battle Drona became so devastating that it seemed he would wipe out the army fighting for truth and standing for good. Krishna, the spiritual hero of the epic, asked Bhima, a younger brother of Yudhi-shthira and the popular hero of the epic, to kill an elephant called Ashvatthama and declare to Drona that Ashvatthma was killed. Bhima did so. Ashvatthama also happened to be the name of Drona's only son for whose sake Drona was fighting so hard. When Bhima reported that Ashvatthama was killed, Drona could not believe it but turned to Yudhi-shthira for verification. Now imagine the dilemma that put Yudhi-shthira into. That is what Darshana is talking about.

Mahila: Yes, on one side is his dearest principle he has upheld all his life. That is, speaking the truth, no matter the consequences. On the other

side, if he tells Drona that Ashvatthama was truly killed, Drona would quit fighting and the side of good would not face defeat taking with it lives of thousands who were fighting for truth and good.

Sanatan: Well put, Mahila. Yudhi-shthira said that Ashvatthama was killed and muttered the words "Man or elephant" three times to soothe his conscience. But he did not say those words loud enough for Drona to hear. Drona quit fighting and was promptly killed. Another version of the story says that he said the words loudly enough but Bhima blew his victory conch so loud at the time that the words were drowned by the tumult. In either case, Yudhi-sthira can be said to have neglected telling the whole truth. Some may defend him as having had to say a very white lie or half-truth. Others may accuse him of giving up on his ethical principle of telling the truth and not worrying about the consequences. Consequentialists would reply, I guess, by saying that he acted to make truth itself victorious. They would say he for once thought about the effects of his actions in real life rather than living in the thin air of an abstract principle. Consequentialism or non-consequentialism?

There is an immense amount of literature surrounding the epic story of the *Maha-bharata.* By far the most of it is written in Bengali, Hindi, Marathi, Malayalam, Tamil or other languages of India. Extremely little trickles down in English and, as a consequence, the English-speaking elite in India continue to get brain-washed by Western negativist versions who see nothing but a family feud in the whole epic story, depriving themselves of vital moral concerns of life. Through this literature I came to know of two diametrically opposed interpretations of what happened after Yudhi-shthira uttered the white lie or half-truth. I may go on but I need to stay within my time limit.

Darshana: Sanatan, I asked you to be brief. But I see that it is best that you tell the whole story and the way it is understood by indigenous commentators.

Sanatan: According to the legend, whenever Yudhi-shthira mounted his chariot, the entire chariot rose above the ground into the air by the width of four fingers. It stayed in the air without touching the ground while he rode the chariot. This was because of his devotion to truth. The power of truth elevated his chariot. But as soon as he uttered the half-truth involving Ashvatthama, his chariot came down to the earth and never went back up again.

Here is where I learned about the two interpretations I was alluding to. They are quite opposed to each other. I read one commentator saying

that this clearly indicated that Yudhi-shthira lost his power of truth the moment he abdicated his high moral ground and succumbed to earthly concerns compromising his principle of speaking the truth. The chariot coming down to the earth, in this view, which to me is clearly deontological or non-consequentialist, affirms the glorious nobility of non-consequentialism because, according to this theory, there can never be a compromise with untruth. So, in this view, the fall of the chariot symbolized the fall of Yudhi-sthira himself.

Navin: Darshana may correct me, but Gandhi's insistence on regarding the eleven vows as *maha-vratas* or great vows was also non-consequentialist.

Darshana: Navin is right. Of course, Sanatan is on solid ground thinking that the commentator he is referring to is a non-consequentialist. Such moral thinkers, like Kant, are beholden by lofty ethical principles. But, Sanatan, what did the other commentator say?

Sanatan: It was a woman. She said in her interpretive commentary on the event that for once Yudhi-shthira connected with his people and thought about their well being rather than staying in the puffed up air of his own making, no matter how glorious he thought that air was. He stopped thinking about himself, so to say, in terms of being able to go to heaven because he would put up with hardships speaking the truth. In this act of seemingly compromising the rule of telling the truth, he left a hallowed airy position and touched back on earth and began thinking about his people and what he could do for them in real life. So, according to her the chariot landing on the ground was a symbol of real and not putative truth winning in the battle of life.

Sanskriti: What a wonderful story! Fascinating, even as it does not resolve the fundamental dilemma.

Darshana: Sanskriti, we are kidding ourselves if we think something will come up and magically resolve the dilemma for us. If it was easy, why did Shri Krishna himself ask Bhima to destroy the elephant in the first place?

Sanatan: While in his previous incarnation as Shri Rama he never compromised on truth and lived an exemplary life for us to emulate?

Darhsana: Indeed. Life is not easy. Logic mirrors it, at least at times.

Darshana: The story aptly illustrates the point between consequentialism and non-consequentialism. But now that we are in it, I am not ready to let go of Sanatan yet. We have the hallowed law of *karma* enunciated in our definition of Hinduism as accountability for all actions. This telling of half-truth was a serious act of Yudhi-shthira. How was he made to account for it? Tell us, Sanatan. I was the one who asked you to be brief, but now I must ask you, yet again, to complete the story.

Sanatan: That is a beautiful story in itself. At the end of his life Yudhi-shthira presented himself to Yama or God of Death who was his own alter ego, called Dharma or Dharma-raja himself. Dharma asked him if he deserved to go to heaven or hell. Yudhi-shthira said that, to tell the truth, he spoke the truth most of the time at great hardship to himself and so deserved to go to heaven. But he asked Dharma whether his wife and brothers who supported him all his life were also going to heaven. Dharma told him and showed him by some form of television that, since they were not such good truth-tellers, they were actually suffering in hell. Yudhi-shthira was deeply dejected and refused to go to heaven while his dear ones suffered in hell. Thereupon Dharma told him that it was a deliberate illusion and they were also going to heaven. Yudhi-shthira's seeing the illusion of his brothers in hell was the consequence of his uttering the half-truth in the battlefield.

Sanskriti: What a lovely way of showing accountability for all actions!

Anish: I got to read the *Maha-bharata*, no matter how long it takes. It seems so fascinating. What gems of stories it contains that bring out life itself in all its colors! I have been procrastinating on reading that gigantic piece of literature. But Sanatan's narration helped me decide to read it. Thanks, Sanatan.

Sanatan: You are welcome, Anish.

Madhyama: Incidentally, this brings out the import of the source of Hinduism called *itihasa*, which I earlier rendered as exemplary history. Western hang-up on documentary history subjects us to a lifeless chronicle of political events, valorizing event sequence as historical truth. Hindu notion of *itihasa*, on the other hand, effectively inspires people through existential narration of illustrative life situations like Yudhi-shthira's truth trial. We learnt a concrete example of how the Hindu tradition works to impart real life lessons to millions of people in

textual form that is accessible, inspirational and effective at the same time. Darshana, please continue.

Darshana: Let me complete the two points I promised. The two great theories in moral philosophy, therefore, are consequentialism and non-consequentialism. Let us not get into further depth and details about them, though there are interesting niceties and subtleties there.

Sevak: I love to see Darshana always eager to talk about deeper aspects of philosophy. But I fear she got to keep us from distraction if possible.

Darshana: Yes, I can go on and on, but got to think of other things. There are the two great theories. There is the third theory called virtue ethics. It is about developing virtues as the heart of ethics. It is not about producing certain material consequences as consequentialism would want us to do. It is not about doing the right thing, no matter what, as the deontologists would like us to behave. It is about imbibing certain virtues to build character that will enhance the overall quality of life and make it worth living. As you develop the virtues you have a sense of progress, worth and self-esteem on your accomplishment. You build character through inculcating virtues. Your character is your identity from the moral perspective. This is the third great type in ethical theory.

The four universal virtues of human relationships incorporated in Madhyama's presentation accord the virtue theory its due. We may recall how fulfillment, which has to be produced through *purushartha* or human effort, occurs in four different forms from *kama* to *moksha*. It is another whole category in the presentation represented by the four values to be achieved or rather produced as consequences. This is the way we have the consequentialist perspective installed in our foundations.

We haven't forgotten the non-consequentialist perspective. While reaching different layers of fulfillment is produced by efforts leading to the attainment of *kama* needs and *artha* values, *samanya dharma* is largely developed through non-consequentialist approach. *Satya* and *ahimsa*, or truthfulness and nonviolence, are not pursued with a gratifying egoistic consequence in mind. That a deeper level fulfillment oozes out is not the goal toward which one is working. Without the spirit of contribution or dedication it won't work. If a relationship is a façade, the recipient party in relationship will see through it and the relationship will suffer a mortal blow. *Dama* or self-restraint and *shuchi* or purity are similarly virtues that are not developed for egoistic or hedonist purposes for, otherwise, they too would suffer badly in the relationship.

The very idea of mutually meaningful and fulfilling relationship supported by *samanya dharma* involves compromising of ego and pride. It cannot succeed without meeting the other person or persons at least half way and often more than half way. But the point is that one learns to do it by seeing that what one gains in quality of inner fulfillment far outweighs the petty though quantitatively impressive gaining of *kama* and *artha* values which are acquisitive or aggrandizing in character. *Dharma*, on the other side, is reciprocal to say the least and primarily contributive and abdicative, not to speak of loving and kind, in character. It is a happy confluence of love and obligation. I am tempted to coin the term "lovligation" to indicate what is involved. If sex is the prime example of *kama* and money that of *artha*, mother's relationship with child is the prime example of dharma. It is a great, real-life, promising working-together of consequentialism, non-consequentialism and virtue ethics. Mother's approach to the child incorporates the positive aspects of all the three theories of morality. *Samanya dharma* is just a conceptual mouthpiece that articulates this synthetic approach in a nutshell.

We here won't pretend to resolve the logical tangles between the three major ethical theories. Logical issues among the theories linger even after centuries of earnest intellectual efforts carried on largely by Western philosophers. Yet it is not a mean accomplishment that Hindu theory of four values of life to be achieved through the *samanya dharma* format accords a meaningful place to all the three in a unison that promises to work in existential harmony in any human community.

The fact that priorities between the three competing theories cannot be determined should not deter us from incorporating all three in a significant way. On the contrary, the indetermination can be seen to be a good reason to work for their real life integration in an existentially feasible manner. Theoretical resolution on logocentric lines may not be abandoned, but the Hindu accomplishment of a harmoniously workable synthesis deserves to be hailed as a distinct achievement in its own right. In the least, it can be seen to inspire accepting the challenge to attempt constructing alternative systems with greater benefits.

Well, I didn't know what I was doing. Or did I?! Let me find my intellectual moorings. I was talking about making two points, one about virtue ethics and the other about making four virtues into a coherent whole. Talking about the first I also substantially touched on the other, showing how the four virtues hold together as one unit. One matter remains to be made explicit. The sequencing of the four is intentional. If a relationship is to be meaningful and fulfilling to all the parties involved, each party needs first of all to restrain itself and not insist on

having things only one's own way. That is common sense. Hence it is that *dama* or self-restraint comes at the beginning of the four. *Satya* and *ahimsa* or truthfulness and nonviolence toward the other are obviously necessary for such relationship. Finally, *shuchi* or purity intuitively tells us that without a pure heart and an open mind, implied by *shuchi*, we cannot truly hope to sustain such relationship. To be clear, purity is of two kinds, internal and external. Both are important but, from the moral point of view that we are particularly developing, internal purity has an edge.

I believe I am done as far as the four universal virtues of human relationships are concerned. This is *samanya dharma* category, which comes after the first category of four values of life. Madhyama, take this further.

Madhyama: Thank you very much, Darshana, for leading us into the depths of moral philosophy. Sanskriti, you come to my mind as one who I saw wanting a way out of the dilemma that Darshana seemed to you to be presenting.

Sanskriti: I am overwhelmed at this point, Madhyama. I need time to sort it all out in my head. But if I get it right Darshana is saying that the four universal virtues are meant to let us develop meaningful and fulfilling ways of relating with all that we come in contact with. If I try to imbibe the four virtues and find my relationships improve and sustain them I will be combining all the three major theories of ethics. This much seems to make sense to me.

Darshana: Wow, Sanskriti, you already got a lot there. In fact you got the essence of it very well distilled in your mind.

Sanskriti: Thank you, Darshana. How did I do that?!

Darshana: For now let us say it is your inner intuitive capacity.

Sanskriti: I won't mind that!

Madhyama: Good! We made real progress and it feels wonderful. The next in line are the four defining principles as a category with our familiar four principles. We have discussed them more than perhaps anything else. Do we want to talk about this any more?

Sevak: I guess we do not want to take up anything there in terms of substance. On procedure and presentation, I will recommend in general to Madhyama that when she writes up the sixteen blocks of the foundational structure, she should apply a few uniform concepts to each. First of all there is the matter of articulation. The gist of the block item should be spelled out in brief detail in as simple a manner as possible without compromising the clear formulation of the conceptual substance involved. Good articulation should be accompanied by an adequate expansion of the title of the block item. For instance, let us take the item in the defining principles relating to the many ways to reach the one spiritual being. Here articulation would be to point out the nature of the spiritual path pluralism involved. Proper expansion would mention the four major spiritual paths of knowledge, selfless action, devotion and meditation.

Beyond articulation and expansion of the block title, attention should be paid to the matter of direction and guidance. We do not want to be paternalistic and hold hands. But we certainly would like to indicate ways in which one can apply the item in one's life and thinking. Forwarding the example of spiritual paths, directing would involve saying how one may go about choosing a path for oneself. Of course all three concepts may not apply in each case but this will make the template presentation uniform and therefore easier to comprehend.

Madhyama: Many thanks, Sevakji, I will try to incorporate the three concepts in writing up the foundations for the presentation. Last, we should talk about the final four foundation blocks in the fourth category called salient standpoints. The category is a sort of a catchall and therefore has the looks of a residuary block. But as often is the case looks are deceiving.

Darshana: Quite true. The last category spells out some of the important items peculiar to Hinduism and as such it shows where Hinduism stands on important issues. It can also be regarded as Hinduism's contribution to the development of religion on the world stage.

Sevak: Darshana put it well. Madhyama, you have held conference with Darshana and myself more than once on this category. Would you like to tell the group what you took away from there?

Madhyama: Let me try. It seems to me that we have at least broadly touched upon all the four items in the category of salient standpoints in one form or context or another. As a matter of fact, all the sixteen items

can be derived from our discussion in the previous eight sessions. If there seems anything really new and calls for discussion, however, let us do that by all means.

Anish: I am the one who doubts and questions things more often than others. Or, that is how I see myself here. So, I believe, if I do not raise up an issue on this category, Madhyama can just go ahead and prepare the final version of our Hinduism for Today.

Madhyama: Yes, Anish, we'll see. The first item in the category of salient standpoints is called "Universal is enriched by relative." The second item is "Ethical is anchored in spiritual." The third is "Ultimate is both within and beyond." The fourth and last states "Ineffable ultimate grounds both monism and dualism."

Anish: Hey, Madhyama, I notice the wording is different from what you said when you enunciated the whole list of the sixteen foundation blocks.

Madhyama: You got a keen eye, Anish. You're right. I improvised them as I picked up ideas from our discussion and assimilated them with my earlier articulation. Do you prefer the old version, though?

Anish: I like the new one. It is crisp, clearer and simpler.

Sevak: Shows how Madhyama's energy overflow keeps her a step ahead of herself.

Darshana: That's a contradiction, Sevakji, but it is not philosophically culpable.

Sevak: Thank you, Darshana, for letting me get away with it.

Madhyama: The first in the category of salient standpoints also is number thirteen in the full list. It says the *samanya dharma* or the universal moral fulfillment is enriched by the *vishesha dharma* or the relative morality. A good way of understanding the distinction between *samanya* and *vishesha* is to think of *samanya* or the universal, general or common as the constitution of a state and to think of *the vishesha* or the particular, specific or individual as the legal corpus or the body of all the itemized laws of the state. Just as a specific law can be found to be unconstitutional and therefore invalid, a particular *vishesha* rule can be found to have exceeded its source authority that is *samanya*. But, if it is

in conformity with the *samanya*, *vishesha* is adequate and proper and needs to be respected as the wish of the society in the times and circumstances. *Samanya* is like the human body and must be nurtured all the time. *Vishesha* is like all the dress and ornament we put on the body.

Sanskriti: Madhyama, I like this idea. It will let me wear all kinds of saris and ornaments. This enrichment of the *samanya* is made for me!

Mahila: Enrichment it truly is for the richest member of our group!

Sanskriti: Thank you all for letting me get away with my riches.

Darshana: Sevakji has wisely decreed that we won't have class warfare here. We want to construct Hinduism and not deconstruct each other. All the taxes you pay here, Sanskriti, is in terms of attention preferably coupled with logical thinking. Is that fair enough?

Sanskriti: Indeed.

Madhyama: Does anyone have issues with the enrichment of *samanya* by *vishesha*?

Sanatan: In fact it lets me add a big chunk of my conservative agenda to the *samanya*. And the price I pay is that I have to keep it all within the realm of the *samanya*. Why not? I can live with it. Thank you for letting me get away with it.

Navin: Only as long as you do not impose it on us reformists, Sanatan. I like it because it acknowledges the role of needed reform from time to time to keep us abreast of world developments in science and what not. Of course the *samanya* is the big brother looking at it with a watchful eye. I accept it. Thank you for letting me get away with my reforms!

Madhyama: Hey, Sevakji, Darshana, did we count on so many happy bandits?

Sevak: I am pleasantly surprised. There is a point where we can let people do their own thing as long as they commit to the general framework of the foundations.

All: Thank you, Sevakji.

Sanatan: Just an addendum for those who want to pursue this item in the original Sanskrit texts. *Samanya* there is also called *sadharana*.

Madhyama: Thanks, Sanatan. The second item in the category, and number fourteen on the total list brings out how ethical is anchored in spiritual. The grounding is at three levels. One is familiar to the Western religions. The other two are typically Hindu in more pronounced ways. The first is acknowledged through the idea of God in Western religions. God being the father makes all humans His children. We all being His children should treat everyone like our brother or sister, making for a feeling of fellowship and friendship among humans at large. This becomes the anchor for ethical treatment of all humans by each human.

Hinduism affirms that not only the dualism of God as creator and humans as children grounds ethics. Monism holding that there is only one reality also grounds the ethical in spiritual in the sense that each of us should see that the one ultimate reality that is within oneself is also present equally in every other human. This too should result in equal respect and treatment of all. Third, there is the point that because the ethical is anchored in spiritual, it also is an essential prerequisite for embarking on a path toward the spiritual. All spiritual paths, for that reason, should incorporate a generous stratum of the ethical as a prerequisite without which the pursuit of path would not go smoothly.

Anish: Obviously, for myself the second point of the anchor would work the best. Am I not too young for the third?

Mahila: We won't allow such a flimsy excuse, Anish!

Anish: Mahila, thank you for knocking me out of a perma-materialistic path and accelerating me on the spiritual path!

Madhyama: The next item, number fifteen on the total list, is panentheism or the notion that the ultimate being is both immanent or within and transcendent or beyond the visible universe. I guess this should not raise any issues, for we have dealt with it quite in depth and detail.

Darshana: That's right. Madhyama, go for the last, really the last, item.

All: Go, Madhyama, go!

Madhyama: I cannot believe my excitement. We are on the verge of accomplishing the entire matter. Except that I still have to write it up.

The final, really final, item may be the most controversial, depending on how rigidly you are fixed in your metaphysical vision. At the deepest level of your thinking and feeling, do you see yourself as an individual person? Or, are you pure consciousness at that point, beyond all thoughts and emotions, not to speak of actions? If you answer clearly and strongly for one or the other, you will probably have a hard time with the final item.

For, if you think you are basically a person and cannot see yourself giving up your individuality however much you change in your thoughts, feelings and pursuits, you are unlikely to be friendly to monism which says that there is only one being in the world and there is no room for two. Apparently, for you, then, there is you and the ultimate infinite being, resulting in a duality of the I-Thou type. On the other hand, if you think you are primarily pure non-dual consciousness, which is even beyond numbers, let alone thoughts, feelings and actions, you are unlikely to be friends with the dualism of you and the ultimate which for you should merge in unison.

Those of you who are unsure about who you are, a person or pure consciousness, will probably agree that the controversy is without a point, or a tug of war without a rope. For, you are open-ended and not hung up on either monism or dualism. The Upanishadic statement *neti neti* is your anchor. If the ultimate is ineffable in the final analysis, neither monism nor dualism can truly and fully articulate it. Hinduism as proposed here should embrace both these respectable lines of thinking holding that its ineffability lets both monism and dualism get away with their symbol systems. As long as the symbolized stays ineffable and ultimate, the symbol system really does not matter. In other words, after letting many of you get away with your thing, the ultimate lets you get away with your petty controversy about whether there is only one reality.

Anish: Madhyama, I don't mind the ultimate being having the last laugh. It makes sense to me that we arrogate to ourselves too much power to determine its nature and number. Seems I have moved from atheism to agnosticism. Whatever. I will think about it later. Congratulations, Madhyama!

All: Congratulations, Madhyama!

Madhyama: Thank you, all! And, congratulations to you too! There is more for me to work on. May I see any of you and all of you to get your

final points on wording and phrasing of the foundations of Hinduism for Today?

Sevak: Goes without saying. You have unlimited custodial rights on us, Madhyama.

Darshana: Madhyama, you can even keep us on a short leash.

Madhyama: Thanks a lot, everybody. At the next session, I will be back with the template presentation of our Hinduism for Today.

Mahila: Power to you, Madhyama!

Sevak: I have an assignment for everyone. I would like all of you to do a few things. As Madhyama prepares her final version of her foundations in consultation with you, please think about the presentation under process in some depth and detail. Let the group know what items you feel most identified with and what items you feel hesitant about. For, no one has to feel totally at ease with each and every item and no one is expected to. We are individuals after all and have our salient standpoints too.

I also would like you to think about how the seminar has changed your thinking and outlook to any extent and tell the group about it. Indicate the process you went through that brought about the change or, if you did not change, what made you to dig in and stay put. All this is general assignment for everybody.

I have a special assignment for Anish, Mahila and Sanskriti. They are our participants who we have not heard from in terms of leading a presentation. The group would like to hear from them on how, from their own perspectives, they would build further on the foundation that Sanatan, Navin and Madhyama have constructed. Not that they have not contributed. They certainly have. But their perspectives are more from real life and so are important in regard to further development. I believe we can learn a lot from them in this regard and see for ourselves three good examples of how further construction can take place on the basis of the foundational framework.

It is important to realize that the foundational concepts, after all, are meant to apply to life in order to benefit the individual to start with and groups and societies eventually. There is a whole lot more to Hinduism on top of the sixteen and people can bring it to bear on their construction of Hinduism for themselves. We need to see examples of how this enrichment can take place. At least we can show some illustrative ways

in which construction can occur. Anish, Mahila, Sanskriti, how would you like to participate in this special assignment?

Anish: I will be happy to participate and will feel honored to do it. But I want to consult with Sevakji and Darshana and maybe others on how I go about constructing and enriching my own kind of Hinduism on the basis of the foundational framework.

Mahila: On this my feelings are the same as of Anish. I am excited.

Sanskriti: Same here. I am psyched!

Darshana: Anish, Mahila and Sanskriti will see Sevakji and me any time on this. Sevakji, don't forget the celebration ceremonial.

Sevak: Oh, how should I forget? At the beginning of the next session, Sanskriti will help us celebrate by presenting a classical dance performance and some of us will accompany her on musical instruments. As you know Sanskriti is not only an accomplished dancer but also a good singer: she hardly loses the purity of her notes even while she sings and dances at the same time. That's a rare feat and we will see her in action.

We have some work to do. But, after that, are we ready to celebrate?

All: We are ready, Sevakji.

Sevak: *Namas-te*. everyone!

All: *Namas-te*, Sevakji!

SESSION 10:

BUILDING ON THE FOUNDATIONS

Sevak: *Om Tat Sat*, everybody.

All: *Om Tat Sat*, Sevakji.

Sevak: Welcome back. This will be our tenth and probably the final session for this seminar in the philosophy of Hindu thought and spirituality, aiming at constructing a Hinduism for Today. First of all, I want to thank Sanskriti for an exhilarating dance performance accompanied by her own vocal recital. We all enjoyed it and participated in the celebration of the accomplishment of our goal of constructing the foundation of a Hinduism for Today, being the final version of Madhyama's moderate Hinduism.

Our agenda for today is like this. First, we will have Madhyama's presentation. Secondly, we will go around alphabetically to record points where each of us feels comfortable with regard to the sixteen constituents in the foundation that Madhyama has laid out. Each will also indicate constituents that remain not very convincing to him or her. Third, we will have Anish, Mahila and Sanskriti build their construction on the foundation. This will show that while the foundation is solid, coherent, balanced, comprehensive and well-integrated, it also is open-ended enough to allow an individual to construct a building on it that is appropriate for his or her purposes and relates with the individual's life experiences. Even an entire group joined by its specific philosophy that is friendly to the foundation can construct a building that its members can share like a family.

The foundation is not just for Hindus to build on. Others may join in and use it to the extent they find it beneficial. We are sure the foundation is so sure and secure that it can benefit any human on the earth thoughtfully seeking the best possible spiritual life for oneself. Fourthly, there will be a free-for-all open to everyone who wants to comment on the buildings constructed by Anish, Mahila and Sanskriti, though some discussion may already have occurred during their presentations. Finally, each of us will report on how this seminar has changed him or her, if it has, and tell us what impact it will have in their life, going ahead. At this time we will chart our approach to possible comments, criticisms and suggestions we may receive regarding the seminar.

Madhyama, can we trust you to coordinate the sequence of our agenda as we try to execute it? The group knows how I lose track of things when I am speaking on an issue very intently.

Madhyama: I will take care of that, Sevakji. I have a suggestion about the presentation. We all have intensely participated in the construction of the foundation for this Hinduism for Today. So, it is not a product of only my efforts. In fact I have talked to everyone here, sharing the final version and made all the changes necessary to make it as friendly to all of us as I could. To indicate and symbolize the fact that this is our joint product, why won't we read the foundation together? All of us have hard copies of the foundation in our hands. Because the responsibility for the way it appears falls on my shoulders, I will read the general introduction and then we will go around alphabetically to read one item each. We are eight, so we will finish the reading in two rounds. I will then round it up, again, with an indication of the five sources of Hinduism.

Darshana: Sounds good, Madhyama. Thank you for all the good work. Let us start with you reading to us the general introduction.

Madhyama: "Hinduism is more than a religion, it is a congregation of faiths, a synthesis of major spiritual paths and a comprehensive philosophy of our life-world. Over time, and for various reasons, its essence, message and image have become blurred apparently even to some Hindus, not to speak of others. The present attempt seeks to distill and reconstruct its positive features and present them in an idiom that is relevant for today. Their depth, coherence and wide coverage speak for themselves. The total message is open-ended enough to allow for further building of structures suitable to individuals, groups and even humanity at large.

"Through a millennia-long duration Hinduism bas become dauntingly complex, so much that the philosophy of its thought and spirituality is a challenge for easy description. This has led quite a few of even serious thinkers to conclude that Hinduism cannot be defined. In addition, Hinduism being an integration of many lines of religious thinking and spiritual paths in the world, has posed a challenge to attempts to fit it into familiar categories. The present attempt boldly offers a definition of Hinduism in four principles that together distinguish Hinduism at the same time that each of the four can be seen to have an echo in other religions of the world. The four are finely blended and have been carefully nurtured within the fold of Hindu

tradition. They provide insight into the essence of Hindu thought and encompass and integrate the structure of Hindu life-world.

"Tolerance and respect for other faiths is a hallmark of Hinduism so much so that the aspects of Hindu thought that make this possible have become part and parcel of the Hindu way and view of life. Actual spiritual life more than adherence to doctrine is another feature of Hinduism that is widely acknowledged. Living a life of spiritual discipline of one kind or another in order to reach the goal of terminal fulfillment has become a prominent feature of Hinduism.

"The present attempt will show that the philosophy of Hindu thought and spirituality is comprehensive enough to cover major aspects of human life. Of course it does that from the Hindu perspective. The outlook presented covers principal values of life, universal virtues recommended and salient standpoints developed by the Hindu tradition through millennia of time-tested wisdom and travails. The outlook combines beneficial elements of both conservative and reform Hinduisms into a moderate middle, thus enhancing its appeal to a large cross-section of Hindu and, hopefully, other believers and seekers.

"The Hindu outlook presented starts with a narrative of four major values of Hindu life which will be readily seen to incorporate major universal goals in moral and spiritual life in many world religions and even including principal values of human life in general. It then moves into articulating four universal virtues recommended to all humans in order to enhance the quality of human relationships in the society. Emphasizing such enhancement rather than a self-righteous claim of truth is one source of strength for this outlook of Hindu thought and spirituality. The four defining principles of Hinduism follow, as just alluded to. The presentation completes the sixteen-count foundation of Hinduism for Today with the narration of four salient standpoints which are distinctly developed by the Hindu tradition and also make for a significant contribution of Hinduism to the development of world religions."

Now we begin reading the articulation of the sixteen blocks of the foundation. We will go alphabetically, starting with Anish. But let us have introductions to the four categories read by Darshana and Sevakji, in turns, to symbolize their distinct contribution to our being where we are now, with a promising blueprint of Hinduism for Today. Darshana, please give us the introduction to the first category, called "Values of Life."

Darshana: "The Hindu view of life takes life to be movement of consciousness toward fulfillment. It includes four values of life, called

purusharthas or objects of human effort. The four together form an integrated whole meant to provide a balanced and all-round satisfaction to any human being both as an individual and as a member of society. The Hindu view of society is that the best arrangement of society occurs where all four values of life are made accessible to all members of the society working in harmony with each other with minimum of conflict."

Now, Anish, will read the first of the sixteen items.

Anish: "1. Physical needs, called *kama*. These include the individual's immediate needs and desires that do not hurt anyone. Pursued within the bounds of propriety and consensus, consensual satisfaction of physical needs is elemental in helping individuals to outgrow their basic desires in an aesthetically fulfilling manner."

Darshana will read the second item in the list.

Darshana: "2. Social values, called *artha*. Included here are socio-economic values that individuals can acquire without shortchanging anyone and making sure that their acquisition is earned and paid for. All exchanges in the social, economic and political arenas should be fair to all the parties involved as far as possible with effective mechanisms in force to implement the fairness. These mechanisms may take the form of customs and traditions developed by the marketplace beside legal systems of adjudicating disputes. Ensuring fairness is more important than adherence or commitment to a particular political form or ideology."

Next is Madhyama to read item three in the list.

Madhyama: "3. *Dharma* or moral fulfillment. Variously translated, the term *dharma* tends to be the very embodiment of what Hinduism stands for in terms of human nobility, moral uprightness and spiritual pursuit. But it is best understood as all that supports meaningful and fulfilling relationships of individuals in communal bounds with those that they come to interact with. This way it is tied with actually felt and achieved sense of fulfillment that is distinct from and deeper than the common acquisitive fulfillment of the *kama* and *artha* types already referred to. This fulfillment is abdicative and rises above the acquisitive, being achieved as a result of loving contribution and not as an end of struggle to acquire."

Mahila will read the fourth item in the list.

Mahila: "4. *Moksha* or spiritual freedom. This is the most important value of life, being the highest goal of human life. While the other

values provide a measure of fulfillment this is defined as terminal fulfillment and is the ultimate bliss that human life can achieve in spiritual and qualitative terms. It is attained by following a disciplined spiritual path that leads to the experience of the ultimate. When life is understood as movement of consciousness toward fulfillment, *moksha* can be understood as the logical end of life where fulfillment in its true spiritual form is obtained where it won't be possible even to imagine a more fulfilling state."

Sevakji will now read the introduction to the next category, called "Universal Virtues of Human Relationships."

Sevak: "Our relationships with those around us should enhance our happiness. To this end we all need to cultivate certain universal virtues, called *samanya dharma* in Hindu scriptures. They would make the relationships secure and satisfying for all involved. These are affirmed and validated by each individual's conscience or inner sense, called *antar-atman*, and not by an extraneous authority. Four such virtues stand out to help us build human community into a fine web of mutually fulfilling and meaningful relationships. They at once point up our responsibilities to our community and make for deeper fulfillment of the individual in relation to other individuals. It will be seen that the four are in a balance with each other, with the first and fourth developing one's own relational character while the other two direct appropriate behavior toward others."

Navin will now tell us about the fifth item in the list, which is first item in this category.

Navin: "5. Self-restraint or *dama*. Cultivating this virtue means respecting everyone and controlling our behavior accordingly. A person without a modicum of self-restraint obviously is not ready to enter into a meaningful and mutually fulfilling relationship. Hence, *dama* is a prime prerequisite of developing relationships for an individual. It can also be called "temperance" or "moderation." The point is in readiness to recognize everyone's equal standing before us, ensuring that we do not abuse any situation for an undue selfish advantage. Exercising actual self-restraint is important, compared to a verbal acknowledgement that has a hard time moving into real life."

Sanatan will read to us the articulation of item six in our list.

Sanatan: "6. Truthfulness or *satya*. Developing the virtue of truthfulness implies striving to promote everyone's well being by being truthful in thought, speech and action. Thinking about the interest of all and

molding one's truth behavior accordingly is at the heart of the demands of this virtue, not just an easy or gleeful telling of "truth" designed to hurt, such as in blackmailing. Full disclosure of all pertinent facts and not suppressing something materially important with an intent to deceive would be part of *satya* in this light. One needs to be ever vigilant, for situations surreptitiously arise calling for truth not just in letter but in spirit as well."

Sanskriti will tell us about the item seven in the list

Sanskriti: "7. Nonviolence or *ahimsa*. Minimally this virtue involves not harming anyone. Preferably, no harm should be done to anyone in speech, thought or action. Optimally, *ahimsa* involves loving everyone and respecting everybody's right to difference. Concerned communication with a view to persuasion and negotiation has a priority over relishing a flair of conflict and competition."

Sevakji will now read to us the eighth item of the list.

Sevak: "8. Self-purification or *shuchi*. Also called *atma-shuddhi*, the virtue of purity or self-purification can be said to mean and include keeping the body clean, mind open and heart pure. Taken as cleansing it involves both internal and external cleanliness. Sincerity, honesty and transparency as against intrigue and manipulation mark out an attempt on the part of an individual seeking to develop *shuchi* as a universal virtue for preparing oneself for fulfillment through meaningful relationships."

Darshana will now read the introduction to the third category called "Defining Principles."

Darshana: "Now we come to the definition of Hinduism promised earlier. Four core principles define Hinduism as a distinct religion and spiritual philosophy. Each of the four can be traced in other religions, thereby showing how Hinduism shares solidarity with other great faiths. But the four as a whole give Hinduism its defining ground on which each Hindu can stand and proclaim his or her salient individuality and nexus with the human world together with the environment. Anyone largely sympathetic to the quartet can call oneself a Hindu with moral, spiritual and metaphysical accuracy."

We start again with Anish for our second round. He will talk to us about the first item in this category, which is item nine in our total list.

Anish: "9. One spiritual being or *ekam sat*, also called *tad ekam* or *ekam eva advitiyam*. It underlies our life-world, manifesting as a deep bond between all humans that extends to all living beings and beyond to the

planet and even the universe. Its unity and pervasiveness is grasped intuitively. Its search in one form or another has marked the lives of the founders of all world religions."

Darshana will read the next item, number ten on the total list.

Darshana: "10. Many ways of speaking about it. The one spiritual being can be spoken of in many ways or *vipra bahudha vadanti*. In the final analysis, it is ineffable, described only as *neti, neti* or 'not this, not that.' That is so because it is the acme of ultimacy, infinity and intimacy. But those who are touched and moved by it cannot keep themselves from speaking about it, however inadequately. A description widely acclaimed in Hinduism regards it as the ground of all existence or *sat*, all consciousness or *chit* and all bliss or *ananda*. Among the two important ways of speaking about it are as God or *Ishvara* viewed as the creator and sustainer of our life-world and as Godhead or *Brahman* being the true nature of God in itself often viewed as cosmic consciousness. Within the Hindu fold other ways of speaking about it are as *Brahma* or creator, *Vishnu* as sustainer, *Shiva* as dissolver and *Shakti* as cosmic energy, with the latter viewed as feminine. Jews, Christians, Muslims, Confucians, Daoists and others speaking about the source of life-world in their own ways are, from this Hindu perspective, respectable ways of speaking about it."

Madhyama will narrate item eleven in the list.

Madhyama: "11. Many ways of reaching it. We need to go beyond belief to move along the spiritual path. There are many ways to realize the one spiritual being in experience. If viewed as God, the way of love, devotion and worship is in order. If viewed as Godhead, the way of knowledge, contemplation and meditation is appropriate. If viewed as ground of human action, selfless work for humanity is legitimate. All these ways can be combined to suit individual aptitude. Not all ways lead to the ultimate. Three mentioned here use three primary faculties of mind: emotion, intellect and will. Most world faiths combine these in the main."

Mahila is next to read item twelve in the list.

Mahila: "12. *Karma* or accountability for actions. Humans are accountable for their actions. This is famously known as the law or theory of *karma*. There are fair consequences of all human actions that affect others. *Karma* is variously understood as 'as you sow, so do you reap' and 'what goes around comes around.' Basically, though, it is the principle of fairness and an affirmation that life is fair beyond the surface

appearances to the contrary. Without fairness no serious morality is conceivable. Hence *karma*, conceived in this way, is the heart of ethical truth. Since we do not usually end up reaping the fair consequences of all our deeds in this life, we need to reincarnate after death to reap the unrealized consequences. Similarly, we cannot link certain experiences that fall on our head to our deeds in this life. This helps us infer that these are cases of us reaping consequences of deeds performed in previous lives. We freely perform good or bad deeds but cannot escape responsibility for them. We remain bound to their consequences ranging between elation and depression. Going through the consequences, favorable or unfavorable, alone relieves us of the moral impact of the actions we perform. Yet, when we realize the one spiritual being in our experience, impact of the terminal fulfillment this involves is able to break the karmic cycle delivering us to infinite bliss afforded by the experience of the infinite spiritual being."

Next, Sevakji will read to us introduction to the fourth and last category called "Salient Standpoints."

Sevak: "Some of the significant standpoints that have emerged in the development of the Hindu tradition deserve mention because of their uniqueness and vitality. They affect the Hindu ways of living and shape their texture. They influence Hindus in their views of the ultimate and how they regard the ultimate when they approach it to bring themselves in union or communion with it. They constitute distinct contributions of Hinduism to the development of world religions. They are not just peculiar to Hinduism but sustain Hinduism as its vital and stand-by sources of inspiration."

Navin will now take his turn to elaborate the first item in this category, which is item thirteen in the total list.

Navin: "13. Universal is enriched by relative. While universal symbolizes our shared commitment, we need to find expression for our individuality both as persons and groups. In any case reconciling universal and relative helps movement toward harmonious and sustained progress on all values of life. Universal virtues of *samanya dharma* mentioned above are complemented and enriched by *vishesha dharma* or relative morality emerging from differences in time, place and circumstances and recognized by sages representing the conscience of the community. While universal virtues are shared by all and stay uniform, relative rules are addressed to specific groups at specific times under specific circumstances to meet specific needs. As such they are dynamic and flexible, liable to change depending on situation and socio-

individual expediency. But they should always stay within the purview of the universal in order to ensure their fairness and equity on the one hand and their just implementation on the other. Thus, while *samanya* forms the constitution of the community, so to say, *vishesha* is the legal corpus enacted within the bounds of the constitution. Individual's conscience is the arbiter on *samanya*, while public's conscience represented by a living sage is the conflict resolver at the *vishesha* level. *Vishesha* responds to living needs and moving values of the people and as such can vary from culture to culture or even a subculture to subculture. The principle of timeless universal being enriched by the dynamic relative, is a unique reconciliation of the universal and relative offered by Hinduism that can be used by any human society to strengthen its moral fiber and thereby enhance its spiritual quality."

Sanatan, can you please read to us the next item, number fourteen?

Sanatan: "14. Ethical is anchored in spiritual. Normative ethics is anchored in the spiritual and is a prerequisite for spiritual progress. If we prefer to look at the one spiritual being as God, we will regard all humans as God's children and, therefore, as our brothers and sisters. If, on the other hand, we regard the one spiritual being as Godhead, we will see the same essence of God or ground of being in all other human beings. In either case, we will regard all of our fellow beings equally with respect and friendly concern. Without this basic ethical attitude, one would not embark meaningfully on any spiritual path toward God or Godhead."

Sanskriti will now take her turn to give us the next item, number fifteen.

Sanskriti: '15. Ultimate is within and beyond. Spiritual is both immanent and transcendent. Regardless of whether it is viewed as God or as Godhead, the one spiritual being is both immanent or within us and our life-world and also transcendent or beyond us and the universe. It is within us because we can feel it deep down in our hearts. It is beyond us because it is infinite and does not just belong to us. This position is called panentheism, which regards God as pervading the universe and at the same time exceeding far beyond the perceptible world. *Rig-veda* says: *padosya vishva bhutani, tripad asyamritam divi* or the cosmic being pervades the life-world by one quarter while its immortal three quarters stay beyond. *Bhagavad-gita* says: *vishtabhyaham idam sarvam ekamshena sthito jagat* or I as immutable being stay beyond, covering this entire life-world with just a single fragment of myself."

Last, but not the least, is the item sixteen in the list and Sevakji will present it to us.

Sevak: "16. Ineffable can be symbolized by monism or dualism. The languages of monism and dualism with respect to the ultimate are not incompatible. Both languages can be seen to be valid in expressing and approaching the ineffable infinite. Believers in God, seeking a numinous communion, usually maintain themselves to be small, finite and created beings in comparison to the great, infinite and creator God. This is dualistic or theistic language of the I-Thou genre. Seekers of Godhead, on the other hand, working toward a mystical union rather, think of themselves as part and parcel or even one with the ultimate spiritual being. They speak the monistic or non-dualistic language of the That-thou-art type. The ultimate spiritual experience, whether that of Moses or Mira or of Jesus or Meister Eckhart, is beyond all words and concepts and cannot be neatly boxed in just one type of doctrinal language. Meister Eckhart put it intriguingly: The eye with which I see Him is the eye with which He sees me."

Let us move on to Madhyama for the concluding item, called "Sources", where she will indicate the five scriptural sources of Hinduism.

Madhyama: "The above-narrated sixteen-fold foundation of a Hinduism for Today is drawn from the five major scriptural sources of Hinduism.

1. *Shruti*: Primary revelations. Directly heard by or revealed to the sages of yore. This includes the *Vedas*, *Brahmanas*, *Aranyakas* and *Upanishads*.

2. *Smriti*: Secondary revelations. Remembered by the sages. They include the law books called *Dharma-shastras*, written by different sages at different places and times. Among the most highly regarded *smriti* works are the *Manu-smriti* and the *Bhagavad-gita*.

3. *Itihasa*: Exemplary history. The most celebrated in this category of scripture are the great epic *Maha-bharata* written by Sage Vyasa and the immortal epic *Ramayana* written by Sage Valmiki.

4. *Purana*: Synoptic digests. There are eighteen major works in this category. A famous one is called the *Bhagavata-purana*.

5. *Darshana*: Metaphysical visions. Six philosophical systems are included in this category. The most notable are *yoga* and *vedanta*.

These five classic Sanskrit sources are supplemented by an immense literature of spiritual genre composed by saints and poet-devotees over the past millennium in umpteen local languages of India.

Benediction:
Sarve bhavantu sukhinah
Sarve santu niramayah
Sarve bhadrani pashyantu
Ma kashchid duhkhabhag bhavet
Or,
May all be fulfilled.
May all be without affliction.
May all see good.
May no one suffer."

Sevak: Heartiest congratulations, everybody! You have succeeded in accomplishing the goal of the seminar. We have articulated the framework for the foundations of Hinduism relevant for this day and age. It is a fitting finale of our efforts to reach a fine philosophy of Hindu thought and spirituality.

Madhyama: Thank you, Sevakji and Darshana, for guiding us throughout the rough and tumble of the seminar. It has been a highly educational experience for all of us. We learned a great deal about Hinduism and now know that there is much more to Hinduism than what we have absorbed. But many thanks are due to both of you for making all this possible. I am sure I am voicing the sentiment shared by everyone in the group.

All: Exactly. Thank you, Sevakji and Darshana.

Sevak: I am very happy to be a part of this seminar. I am sure so is Darshana. We both enjoyed it and learned from it.

Darshana: Absolutely, Sevakji. I thank you, everyone.

Sevak: Thank you, gang! You are great. Wish you all the best.

Madhyama: We still got work to do. Let's get started on the second item on the agenda. We will go alphabetically and hear from each participant how he or she feels about the sixteen items in the foundational framework we have articulated. Anish, can you start us off?

Anish: Being the youngest of all here, I am perhaps the one with the most *kama* and *artha* still left in my system. I am sure Sanskriti is working on it too, with her husband on her right side!

Sanskriti: You bet, Anish. It will be a while before we are done! He is on my right and I am at his left. Quite traditional, eh? But he says he is keeping me close to his heart that way.

Anish: All the best, Sanskriti! Well, as I work on my physical needs and social values, I think daily of moral fulfillment. I have lost my father. I am very close to my mother. She still showers her blessings on me on a daily basis. She relates with me well and I find my moral fulfillment seeing her find hers through me. Does it make sense?

Mahila: Yes, but you want to be more active providing her an equal measure of moral fulfillment, Anish?

Anish: That fills much of my time, thinking about how I can do that. Her needs are minimal and I try to take care of all she needs and expects. She is not at a high intellectual stage and I do not like to impose on her an artificial layer of sophistication. I guess, as the tradition says, you can never pay off debt from your mother.

Madhyama: Someone said, however great you may become, you will not become greater than your mother.

Anish: There you go! Maybe in some future life I will be the mother and my mom will be my child. Then I will be able to return the favor.

Darshana: You have great sentiment, Anish, and that should count for something.

Anish: Now, I want to talk about spiritual freedom. I have started out setting half an hour for meditation every day. It's too early to say how far I will go. But the idea of finding and feeling pure consciousness at my deepest level fascinates me. I will continue to explore it.

Then, I want to speak to the second category. Self-restraint is not my cup of tea. It's embarrassing. I ought to get a better hold of myself on this. It's the first step as we laid out the *samanya dharma*. On truthfulness, I like to tell what I think is true, but here I see the challenge as being able to listen to others when they think they are uttering the truth. Nonviolence often means to me controlling my anger. I need to work on it quite a bit. I won't blame it on my youthfulness. In fact, what good are youthful energies if they cannot help me control anger?

Madhyama: Anish, you are doing well with such acknowledgement. Many who keep denying it won't get even close to where you are. Just don't feel so guilty that you debilitate yourself.

Anish: Thanks, Madhyama. I need to keep that in mind. Next, I want to make a point about self-purification. I have covered a few points I am working on or I need to. I believe they coincide with my needs for self-purification. As I work on them further, I also will be purifying myself. The third category. I still have my times of doubt regarding the spiritual aspect of the one spiritual being. But if I have made friends with my own consciousness, accepting its existence and giving up scientific pretensions of explaining it away, why can I not make the logical leap to cosmic consciousness? Something inside tells me not to make the leap yet. For one thing, I won't be sure what I would be getting into. I have to let it develop and let it take its own course without forcing myself prematurely.

Multiple ways of speaking about it and reaching it. I do not see myself jumping into an acceptance, let alone commitment, of a deity that many Hindus find comfort with. I no longer pity them as holding crutches on that account. But I can't be one of them. It's not for me. Who knows I may go through a radical transformation at some point in my life and be an ardent devotee surrendered to a deity? I do not see much point in speculating on it.

My strong commitment to fairness leads me to affirm *karma* in one form or another. I also do not find a better alternative. I do not want to forsake *karma* and ethical truth on the ground that science does not admit any purpose to cosmic processes. How can purpose just spring up from a state without any purpose? Emergentism, therefore, makes no sense to me. As I indicated earlier, I am possibly moving from atheism to agnosticism. I am no longer sure that a cosmic spiritual being does not exist.

Last category. Reconciling the universal and the relative is both noble and necessary. I talked to Darshana as I prepared to build my Hinduism on the sixteen-item framework. She talked to me about Kant's own moral proof for the existence of God. If not God in a personified form, some sort of spiritual being seems to me a possible implication from the hold the ethical has on my mind. If I ever come to affirm it, I will readily see it as both within and beyond. On the final item on the total list, I think I will remain more comfortable with the monistic or non-dualistic language to speak about such being at the cosmic level. But a question that Sevakji posed to me during my consultation with him has me thinking vigorously. He said to me, "Anish, let's say you jump to

Godhead over the head of God, but just what makes you sure that there can be Godhead without God in the first place?" In other words, do I like the cart so much that I want to put it in front of the horse?

Sevak: Anish, this self-account was thorough and even moving to me. You opened your heart and touched so much on the personal. I do not think we can expect more from a working scientist. You have shown yourself to be a very worthy Hindu. You will go a long way.

Darshana: I concur with Sevakji on this, Anish. What you said was very honest, transparent and it touched my heart. As a philosopher I often let logic desensitize me. But you showed how a true human heart struggles on issues of fundamental importance in life.

Anish: Thank you, Sevakji and Darshana. I have found both of you to be unfailing sources of support and strength. I feel deeply blessed in your presence.

In the above statement on where I stand on the sixteen items I have given away much of what I was going to say on building my Hinduism on the foundations.

Darshana: Anish, when it is your turn to talk about your building, say whatever you think is left for you to say.

Anish: Thanks, Darshana.

Madhyama: Darshana, it's your turn to talk about the state of your comfort zone with the sixteen.

Darshana: Clarity, coherence, coverage and truth are among my primary criteria when it comes to assessing my comfort level with any statement. The sixteen-fold statement we have carved out seems very high on clarity and coherence. I always can review and revise words and shuffle some of them here and some of them there. At this point I won't call such a shuffling more than sophistry. My comfort level on clarity and coherence, therefore, on the overall unity and integrity of the sixteen is securely satisfactory. At this point, having dissected things tirelessly and seemingly endlessly all through these sessions, I won't pick on the sixteen individually. I just want to note how deeply satisfied I am with the way they all come out clearly to the mind. As a whole they hang together coherently in a remarkable way.

On coverage I must state that, on the whole, we have traversed far and wide. We have covered the full essence of Hinduism in all its major aspects. Maybe I am exaggerating a bit, but we certainly travelled far and wide in our journey. We touched upon much more and then culled the core, so to say. I got to be satisfied with our coverage. But, if I let my predilection for philosophy call the shots, I would say why don't we include elements of all the six systems of Hindu philosophy, that is, *sankhya, yoga, nyaya, vaisheshika, mimamsa* and *vedanta*? But then I will also want to have articulations of at least six sub-systems of *vedanta*, not to speak of *navya-nyaya* and two kinds of mimamsa, Bhatta and Prabhakara. I got to draw and accept the line somewhere. Let me say, therefore, that I am happy with what we have achieved. Our sixteen-fold framework covers a lot of areas, does so in a distinct but elegant way, which makes for good deal of clarity. The framework as a whole has a good sense of unity in construction and purpose. If it cannot satisfy my idiosyncratic appetite for philosophy in terms of coverage, that is not its fault but mine.

Sevak: Darshana, I appreciate your not dragging us deeper into philosophy. But do you want to say nothing at all about one criterion of assessment you left out without comment or elaboration?

Darshana: Oh, Sevakji, I better leave it out. You don't want me to author a big fat book here and now!?

Madhyama: Hey, what's going on here? What are you two talking about?

Darshana: I know Sevakji is teasing me about the fourth criterion. You know I mentioned clarity, coherence, coverage and truth among my primary criteria. I talked about the first three but deliberately left out the fourth, namely, truth. Sevakji knows I can't really do justice to it without writing a whole book on it. Maybe some day, but not here and now. Right, Sevakji?

Sevak: I'll accept that, grudgingly.

Madhyama: Any way, thanks a lot, Darshana, for your great contribution to the intellectual solidarity of our foundation. Now it's my turn to speak about how comfortable I am with the sixteen.

I cannot suppress my utter delight at our achievement. As a conflict resolver I have mediated very difficult cases of conflict and quite a few

times I have hit dire frustration. Not here. We had a great collegial team. We had our differences, for sure, but we worked them out, for the most part, anyway. To a great extent I attribute it to the fairness, friendliness and unitive nature of Hinduism itself. I talked about this project to my colleagues in conflict resolution work. Not a few predicted that the project would not see any tangible result. Many thought that we would quarrel, fight and self-destroy in no more than three sessions. Some said that there is nothing like Hinduism at all. On top, we assembled Hindus from eight distinct perspectives. So, the easy premonition was that we would fall apart in no time and would reach nowhere.

The sixteen-fold framework, our foundations of Hinduism for Today, is something that I feel very deeply happy and content about. It has a neat look. It accommodates an incredible amount of elements, which can have a lot of people locked in hard conflicts for a long time. It is inoffensive. It covers Hinduism distinctly. People often ask why Hindus are not proud of their religion and tradition. This seminar taught me that we cannot simply blame others for this sorry state of affairs. Ask others and they will tell you who they are in a jiffy. Ask Hindus and they would draw a blank. It would make some self-designated detractors of Hinduism to say with glee that they told the world how there is nothing like Hinduism. On second thought, there may be a few who would not draw a blank but instead keep talking pointlessly about all kinds of disparate items in a haphazard manner without any clue to a coherent network of thought about what makes Hinduism. They may intuitively know our definition, though, because I have found most of them identify with our definition the moment they hear it out.

Here is a solid structure of sixteen concepts beautifully organized under four categories that can be hurled at these detractors. It is no less than a challenge to any thinking person with any religious persuasion to take a serious look at our sixteen and not think that they make a solid contribution toward religious understanding itself at the present juncture in humanity's plight. Let him or her come up with something better as far as Hinduism is concerned. It can even be a good blueprint for other religions to follow in terms of challenging them to arrive at their own foundational frameworks and usher in a great interfaith dialog comparing all the frameworks. I am confident that at worst we would have to make minimal adjustments to come out ahead in such comparison in terms of worldwide beneficense and internal coherence, coverage and clarity. I have seen statements issuing from international religious gatherings of different faiths. They are stereotypically platitudinous to the point of vacuity. For example, they cannot even include the word "God" for the

fear of offending Buddhists. To be able to emerge with sixteen points that encompass a wide range within Hinduism is something we should be truly proud of. I certainly am. I am comfortable with everything here.

Mahila: That was a spirited statement, Madhyama. Thank you for an unconditional endorsement.

Madhyama: I am a conflict resolver. But it does not mean I have to be locked into an eternally tranquil long face like Mona Lisa's. So, Mahila, I took this opportunity to show my human side, if you will!

Mahila: That's awesome and fantastic, Madhyama. I am for it. Now, showing my cards on how comfortable I am with the sixteen points of Hinduism for Today, I am going to do the opposite of Anish. Let me say I support it wholeheartedly and am ready to work for it in the social arena. For, social work is my vocation. I think the framework has great potential. We can set up systematic conferences at various levels and for various groups globally to educate Hindus in India and in the worldwide Diaspora in their own tradition, culture and religion with the help of the sixteen-fold framework. But I won't say a lot here. I will speak more in terms of how I will integrate and implement the sixteen in my personal spirituality when I take my turn on building on the foundation.

Madhyama: Thank you, Mahila, for your strong vote of confidence in our sixteen. Let us move on to Navin who is next in the line.

Navin: I am very comfortable with the sixteen. Hey, I am even jubilant. When I presented my reform Hinduism inspired by Mahatma Gandhi, I enunciated Gandhi's eleven great vows. I see quite a few of them in the sixteen and more in spirit if not *verbatim*. I pointed out that for Gandhi, two were the core: *satya* or truthfulness and *ahimsa* or nonviolence. He stressed that all others were derivatives of the twofold core. Our sixteen include Gandhi's two core vows and enshrine them among the four universal virtues of human relationships. Needless to say, that makes me quite happy.

I also see that item thirteen distinctly mentions *vishesha dharma* or specific rules providing enrichment to the *samanya dharma* or universal virtues. But it keeps the *vishesha* under the purview of the *samanya*. This keeps reform possible and yet under check so that it does not go overboard. It may sound strange to hear a reformist talking about checking reformist zeal but, just as Sanatan seems to have realized that conservatism can become pernicious by pushing an extreme, I must

reciprocate by protecting the reformist agenda from being hijacked by zealots who want change for the sake of change. Gandhi stood steadfast for the two core values and would never compromise them. If you want to call it his conservatism, so be it: you can count me as a conservative with him.

Sanatan: Welcome to conservatism, Navin.

Navin: I know, Sanatan, we have some differences that won't go away easily.

Sanatan: We together will make life spicy. Who wants a bland life?

Navin: Hey, Sanatan. Do not remind me of my appetite for spicy food. I am supposed to curb my appetite under Gandhi's vows.

Sanatan: My conservatism also wants me to curb the appetite for spicy food. We will fight it out together.

Navin: Yes, we will gang up against appetite together.

Sanskriti: Hey, you bland guys, a moderate dose of spice is not all that bad. None of us is a teenager. So, moderation is all we can take, right?

Madhyama: Sanskriti, are you accusing my vocation of being stuck in a middle age crisis?!

Darshana: Let us mold this spicy discussion from real spice to spice conceived as philosophical debate.

Sanskriti: Only if you promise to expose me to dilemmas I can resolve.

Darshana: You guys know I am in hardcore philosophy: logic, epistemology, metaphysics. Mild, bland soft-core stuff is too wishy-washy for me. So, I deal only in hardcore dilemmas!

Sanatan: You people can talk philosophy if you like. I am going to take my turn and do what conservatives do. If Navin has reason to take delight in the sixteen, I have no gripe with the sixteen either. On my interpretation the sixteen embody conservatism. Maybe not the diehard type orthodoxy or fundamentalism. But good old decent conservative in me is quite satisfied. The sixteen give place to the one spiritual being

and note many ways to speak about it, which is supported by the scripture. The three spiritual paths alluded to in the description of item eleven are enshrined in *the Bhagavad-gita*. Theory of *karma* in item twelve is not the hardcore fatalism preferred by some fellow conservatives to my right. But I need some breathing room, some freedom in my theory of *karma*. The description of *karma* in item twelve gives me that. If physical needs or *kama* and social values or *artha* are pre-ordained by one's *prarabdha* or the *karma* that is responsible for the present body, *dharma* and *moksha* are never under the domain of *karma* except for diehard fanatics and I don't count myself among them.

But don't think I will forsake conservatism. The four values of life, the first four items in the list of sixteen, are all traditional and my cup of conservative tea. The next four items, that is, the universal virtues, are part of the virtue list I enumerated in the presentation of my type of Hindu conservatism inspired by Jaydayal Goyandka. I have voiced my satisfaction with the first twelve items by now. Turning to item thirteen, I want to sound the same sentiment as Navin on it, except in the reverse. If he thinks reformism gets its due with the flexible *vishesha*, I think it gives conservatism its due too by just being there. All *vishesha* will stay with us as long as it works with the basic conservative values in the first four items. Even the *smriti* or secondary revelations say that all *dharma* or piety should be practiced adjusted to *desha* or place, *kala* or time and *apat* or circumstance. So, I would assert that a good conservative is one who makes the needed adjustments but keeps faith. So, three cheers for our sixteen!

Sevak: How about sixteen cheers for our sixteen? Do I need to say more in voicing my deep satisfaction with the entire line-up of the sixteen-fold framework? The seminar has exceeded my expectations. Like Madhyama's colleagues I too was surrounded by some doubt as to whether we will come through and achieve something, especially when we espoused an open-ended format where we wandered freely and had a minimal structure to lead and guide us. Besides the nature of Hinduism, which helped us, the harmonious and cooperative spirit of this group played a big role in our success too. So, a big thank you to all of you, one more time.

All: Thank you, Sevakji.

Madhyama: It seems to me that we have finished the second item on our five-item agenda for today's session. If we get a little boisterous, it is entirely understandable and to be forgiven. We were supposed to go into

items that we did not quite feel comfortable with. There was not a lot of this. But not that all was within comfort zone. As I understand it, we never planned for, nor expected that everything we arrive at will be totally acceptable to all of us. We do not live in a fantasyland. To find this much support as we have is as much reason there can be to celebrate in full measure.

Now we briefly illustrate how anyone with thought, insight and further information from Hinduism or, for that matter, other religions, philosophies and spiritualities, can build a structure on the sixteen-fold foundation we have laid. The sixteen as broad framework should of course be the base, source and inspiration for such building. But the building can be original, novel and innovative in its own right as it embodies the foundation in its own way. We need to talk to Anish, Mahila and Sanskriti to show us how further ingredients can be brought in to top the foundation and erect the building.

Anish, would you like to tell us about your building?

Anish: Currently we are talking about the sixteen items as the foundation and asking me, Mahila and Sanskriti to build different types of structure by way of illustration. I think one time we thought of Madhyama's fourfold definition of Hinduism as the foundation which was to be expanded into a house, building or structure in which we would bring some beautiful furniture or decorative items. So, am I supposed to be a builder-architect or an interior decorator?

Madhyama: I am sorry, Anish. In the rush of things we got our metaphors blurred. I now remember we talked about the metaphor of a tree. We bypassed the tree, I suppose.

Sanskriti: Hey, guys. Don't get hung up on metaphors. They are there only to help and not to puzzle us. If it helps, I will be the interior decorator and let Anish be the architect.

Sanatan: Didn't we call the sixteen items once by the term architectonic?

Sanskriti: Hey, you guys, cut it out. No more talk about metaphors. Let's talk substance.

Darshana: That's my girl, Sanskriti. No rhetoric. Just substance.

Sanskriti: No, Darshana, we are in a mood to celebrate. Substance too should look good. We will adorn it.

Anish: Let me take over and not worry about getting the right metaphor and fitting into it. I am supposed to be a scientist after all. I want to bring a taste of physical and life sciences in this seminar. And this is the right time.

Mahila: If that is the case, I will bring a taste of social sciences to the seminar. But I will await my turn.

Sanskriti: Last but not the least, I will bring a taste of arts and humanities to this seminar. We three will sprinkle the seminar with all the areas of the academia.

Sevak: I cannot believe we old professors are getting bypassed. What do you say, Darshana?

Darshana: Now, don't be jealous, Sevakji! You've retired and I may retire in a few years. Let us play the *sakshi-chaitanya* or the witness consciousness like the two Upanishadic birds and enjoy the game. But no, I take it back. Only one of the two Upanishadic birds was the true witness, the other enjoyed the fruit.

Sevak: I was just going to say that. Darshana, you're right, it's time for us to look but not look askance. Just watch what happens!

Madhyama: Anish, go ahead.

Anish: Well, I don't know and don't care if I am an architect or a decorator.

Sanskriti: Or a bird, chirping from a tree!

Anish: Indeed! If I have an identity problem, I want to forget it. And the folks here want to help me and not help me. Both. Whatever. Here goes.

I have already given away much of my building when I touched upon each of the sixteen in terms of how comfortable I feel about them. So, now I will make one point. But it's a big weighty point, at least for me.

As far as my science background is concerned you would like to know that I am being drawn more and more toward fundamental research. I never thought my interest in applied science would wane. I thought once an engineer, always an engineer. But my interest in

fundamental research has recently become quite intense. I am excited about locating and identifying consciousness in the brain, cells, molecules or wherever fundamental research leads. However, I hit a roadblock as I talked to Darshana about this issue in preparation of this building.

Let me start at the beginning. My major concern in opposing a personal God is the stark improbability of such an entity existing if you just look at what science has discovered. When I read Bertrand Russell he struck a very sympathetic chord. He said that the scientific probability of the Christian God existing is exactly the same as that of the tooth fairy.

Mahila: That's good old Bertie's malicious wit, Anish!

Anish: Whatever, but the point stuck in my mind. Just think of the world of science and you see what Russell means and you cannot but rethink if you are a theist. How do you counter it? Where would the probability count stand even if God improves his probability rating? Can you see him hitting fifty per cent as far as scientific world is concerned? Of course there are the so-called proofs for the existence of God. Even all of them put together are unable to swerve me toward God. True, if you are emotionally attached to him, that's a different matter. If you are dogmatically into his existence that too is a different matter. I am not going to argue with either of these two people, for they are not where science is. I won't hurt their right to be where they are. Let them be. But emotion or belief alone is not going to move me. For, I can see emotion and belief go the other way too. They do not advance the issue toward resolution.

Darshana: Anish, you are presenting quite a logical case so far.

Anish: But, Darshana, you are the one who knocked me out of my assumed logical safety net.

Madhyama: I am getting curious now what could have thrown Anish out of his conviction, especially as he is armored with science all around him.

Anish: Supporting my conviction against a personal God, specially of the type found in Western religions, is the strongly prevalent mainstream view in the scientific community that only matter exists at the core of the universe and the so-called mind arose or evolved from matter by what

should be held to be a chance combination of right chemicals. But as a counter-dogma to the religious dogma that the true core of the universe is mind, especially the super-mind of God, materialism has to explain the occurrence or the incidence of mind. Well, there are several philosophies to serve materialists.

Darshana: In fact, it is the materialists who have constructed these theories, Anish.

Anish: I stand corrected, Darshana. I have tried to familiarize myself with these theories, which issue from scientific materialism.

Mahila: Is there a materialism outside science?

Darshana: Sure, Mahila. Marxism and communist ideology are based on what they call dialectical materialism. Even in ancient India there was a philosophy called *lokayata* or a thinker called Charvaka who maintained that the four material elements were all there is to the world, including the mind.

Mahila: Somehow I thought materialism was just an offshoot of modern science. But I was wrong.

Anish: Any way, I will only name a few of the philosophies that are offshoots of materialism: behaviorism, naturalism, physicalism, identity theory, eliminativism, epiphenomenalism. They all talk about mind and matter in glowing terms of their own and cause a conviction in the mind ready to believe in science that matter is after all all that there is. But speaking from the viewpoint of fundamental research the proof of the pudding is not in an abstract philosophy supporting an assumption of scientific community but a physical identification or location of mind. As I turned to fundamental research I was amazed to find that science has not yet succeeded in showing just where in the brain consciousness resides. Yes, brain physiologists can tell us what functions are performed or controlled by what parts of the brain or what groups of neurons. Theories lay down how mental events and brain processes coincide or are even identical, meaning that mental events are reduced to brain processes. In sum, this reduction is the crucial point. Materialism got to reduce mental events to brain processes. If not brain process, the reduction can be to cells, molecules or deeper to atoms or subatomic particles or processes. The major problem now seems to be locating consciousness so that the proper reduction can be effected. If you cannot

locate it somewhere in matter, you cannot take the next step to reduce it to that piece or particle or element of matter.

Sanskriti: I am trying to fix my mind around this whatever of matter that you are talking about, Anish. How about calling it M, meaning the target material something where the scientist is trying to locate consciousness.

Anish: If we do that we will be ignoring theories that try to locate consciousness in a group of neurons or even the entire brain talking about holographic image or holistic aspect of consciousness. But this has never attracted me because mind or consciousness in its subtlest form focuses on its object like a razor or rather a laser beam. How can a diffuse collection of neurons or atoms or whatever be that fine sharp point of consciousness? Mind of course moves from one object to another and I do not see how a whole collection of diffuse matter together with its complex constituents would move around like that. So, not being convinced by holistic theories I am drawn to some fine target as you are talking about, Sanskriti. Let us call it M, as you say.

Sanskriti: Now are you telling us that science has not yet found such target matter, called M?

Anish: That's right. Not yet. But of course hope is alive, that it will be found.

Mahila: So what has Darshana to do with that?

Anish: Darshana came up with some theoretical questions, which had me knocked out without any possible answers that I can think of.

Madhyama: I got to know what those questions are.

Anish: I will tell you. You folks then help me retain my materialism with which I am struggling now. Yes, I have vacillated between materialism and dualism. Dualism, meaning mind and matter both exist, is not an easy position either, as Darshana related it to me.

Madhyama: Now, Anish, you just talk about Darshana's questions. We are all ears for that. Do not distract us into dualism or whatever at this point.

Anish: Fine. Let me clarify one thing, though. Darshana said she won't take any credit for the questions. She said she found most of these questions in a book by Colin McGinn.

First question about target M, meaning whatever matter is the target to which mind is proposed to be reduced, has to meet the attribute of being or representing intentionality. The latter is the quality of normal mind or consciousness to intend an object. For example, I may be thinking of a chair or, let's say, I am conscious of a pen. Would the target M, which has to be a piece of matter, also be conscious of a pen? If so, it would not be matter but mind already. If not, how is it going to represent the fact that it is about a pen? How would it be different when it is about a chair, and so on and on, because I can be conscious of millions of things. In the first place the question is how intentionality will be represented by any target M at all. In other words, what in the world, in the material world, would I be looking for that I can even theoretically identify as intentional, that is, meaning an object different from itself? Any piece of matter is supposed to represent itself. A pen is a pen and a chair is a chair. But how can a material object represent something else? Mind is not a chair but it can think of one. Can chair think of a pen? So, how is intentionality to be looked for, let alone identified in a convincing way, is a fundamental question. I have no idea how even the most fundamental research in science would answer this question.

Science certainly can tell us what is going on in the brain when certain mental events are taking place. But how does any brain process represent intentionality, which shifts like crazy all the time and has no limit or even reason? If you have tried to meditate, you know how mind will go to thousand places like a drunken monkey even as you try to focus it on one thing. You can pile neurons upon neurons but how at all can a neuron point to a chair, of all the things?

Sanskriti: How about regarding that consciousness comes out of the brain rather than saying that it is nothing but target M in the brain?

Anish: Materialists have played with that too in frustration. That position is called epiphenomenalism, which has several problems of its own. Darshana can tell you more about that and other possible positions all of which have problems.

Mahila: Anish, you better complete the list of Darshana's questions.

Anish: Another question is how target M is going to be as spaceless as a mental event. When you actually experience a mental event, it is not supposed to be in space. If you are thinking of an elephant, your brain or mind does not expand to fill the space that an elephant requires. So, apparently, mind is not in space, though brain obviously is. Any target M, presumably inside the brain, will be identified as having a mass that occupies space. How is it going to represent a spaceless idea of an elephant? Or, if it does, how is a scientist going to look for it and identify it? Intriguing, to say the least.

Then, what goes on in the mind is private and subjective. Nobody knows what I am thinking but of course I do and I alone do. Target M, being something material that is an object of scientific observation, has to be an object that is available for repeatable public observation. If target M is private and subjective like the mind, then it is itself mind rather than matter and we are back to square one.

Finally, a version of what I already talked about. Mind certainly has ideas and emotions. The latter can be elaborately identified as all kinds of neurological processes inside the body when fear or anger grips a man.

Mahila: Or a woman, Anish. We are not free of emotions. In fact, you men call us nothing but bundles of emotions.

Anish: Sorry, my man was supposed to include women. But nowadays women want to be named explicitly. Old habits die hard.

Mahila: Even in young men like you!

Anish: You got me there, Mahila! But let's go back to emotions and ideas, which routinely occur in the mind. There still is doubt whether neurological impact is all there is to emotions.

Sanatan: If I shiver when I am angry, is anger nothing but shivering? Shivering can happen without anger too. But it is not anger at that time.

Anish: Precisely. But if emotions pose a challenge, ideas pose even bigger challenge. They too do not occupy space. And by definition. You cannot say that your idea of a yard is as long as a yard though a yard is as long. You can tell that an inch is shorter than a yard but how is the idea of an inch going to be shorter than that of a yard? Any target M is going to be of a particular size rather than not having a size, unlike what it seeks to represent, namely, an idea in mind.

I think that is enough. Darshana can fill your mind, if it is not a piece of matter, with many more puzzles. But these are serious questions for a scientist doing fundamental research. Darshana told me that there are points where fundamental questions in science pass into philosophy. There is a whole area of philosophy called philosophy of science where philosophers try to understand and explain basic issues in science like causality, action at a distance, nature of scientific hypothesis and so on. Darshana has stirred my interest in this area but I am not sure how deep I want to go into it.

Madhyama: Darshana is good at making you wonder about how things work at all even when they work very well.

Darshana: The question is whether you want to be challenged by logical thinking or stay content with suppressing all questions that arise. Let me give an interesting example. Philosophers of science have developed quite an esoteric terminology that some scientists who want to learn about the subject find to be very opaque and threatening. Some of these scientists come out calling names to philosophy of science as meaningless on this account. They simply do not wish to be challenged by logic. I concede, however, that complex terminology needs to be curbed from being too prolix and opaque.

Anish: Folks, I am done. That is all I want to say by way of my building on the foundations. Relating this with our sixteen-fold framework, the rub comes in for me at the defining principle which states that there is one spiritual being. This being presumably has to be at least conscious if it is going to be spiritual in any sense. Earlier, I had plenty doubts on the existence of such being especially if you enlarge it into a full-fledged God of the personal kind. But now, after pondering Darshana's or Colin McGinn's questions, I cannot emphatically say any more that I am just the plain old materialist that I posed to be for much of my life. If, indeed, consciousness cannot be ruled out as different from matter or target M, I get closer to agnosticism rather than to atheism. So, I won't be as hostile to personal God as I used to be for years. But I am not yet ready to embrace a personal God wholeheartedly. So, as Darshana has shaken up my own personal foundations, I stay largely comfortable with our sixteen-item foundations, albeit with some lingering uneasiness with the one spiritual being and what it implies.

Madhyama: Anish, you have shared very thoughtful and insightful moments with us. Thanks a lot. I want to turn to Mahila and invite her to share her building on our sixteen-fold framework.

Mahila: Anish brought to the framework a perspective issuing from physical and life sciences. I will try to bring one from the social sciences. Let me first narrate what Darshana did to me that is a bit akin to Anish.

Sanskriti: Darshana is busy shaking up all of us to the core!

Mahila: Did she shake you up too, Sanskriti?

Sanskriti: I am afraid she might if I let her talk too much philosophy. I will try to distract her by taking her to my wardrobe!

Darshana: Sanskriti, your wardrobe is indeed beautiful and very stylish. But it will not keep me distracted for long!

Sanskriti: Maybe I will be old enough for philosophy by then! What am I saying? I don't want to be old, ever!

Sevak: One day, Sanskriti, you may outgrow your *kama* and *artha*!

Sanskriti: Sevakji, that will be the day!

Madhyama: Hey, let us not be distracted by Sanskriti's eternal youth! I want to go back to Mahila.

Mahila: We all know that there are physical facts. Like, water is made up of hydrogen and oxygen. And that hydrogen and oxygen can also be divided into further chemical components, which are all physical. Now, are there social facts, too? If the voting age in a country is eighteen, is that a fact, a social fact and, if so, is it at the same level as a physical fact? Or, is it a "softer" fact? For example, someone who is seventeen may vote illegally and may even be punished for that, but you cannot find water ever to be breaking the law that it is made up of hydrogen and oxygen. Physical facts seem to be hard facts, compared to social facts. But if it was a fact that last year inflation was five percent, that would seem to be a hard fact because we won't be able to change it.

The interesting question is not simply distinguishing two types of fact. It is tempting to think that individual human beings make up

society and therefore social facts. Some philosophers of social science believe that there would be no social facts apart from individuals. This heavily neutralizes the hardness of social facts by relativizing them to individuals. There are others who think there are no social facts at all because they all can be reduced to physical facts. But to what molecules or atoms would you reduce inflation? Or, unemployment? Or, rate of divorce?

Social sciences have the reputation of being soft sciences, if at all hard scientists will let them be called sciences in the first place. The above questions suggest that there is a range of what Darshana calls metaphysical belief when it comes down to regarding social reality or facts. Now, how many of our sixteen items involves social reality? If we say Hinduism is defined by one spiritual being that can be spoken of in many ways and reached in many ways and individuals are accountable for their actions, what kind of facts are all these? Are we talking about people, that is, Hindus believing these statements or are we saying that there is such being out there and there is such accountability as suggested by the law of *karma*?

Navin: Mahila, these questions apply to me and to Sanatan too. For instance, is Hindu conservatism or reform Hinduism a fact or truth of some kind? Are they reducible to just social facts? Do they represent hard facts or soft facts and what is the nature of the truth they represent, if any? Can Anish's scientific colleagues say that they are merely elements of matter after all and so indistinguishable from inert matter? If that way, much of Hinduism is reduced to matter, what happens to truth of Hinduism? Does truth of Hinduism at social level, even if admitted, matter if all social truth boils down to arrangement of inert chemicals? Our whole life then would be a colossal self-deception.

Sanatan: And where does this intellectual game of reduction end or lead to? Just the cosmic big bang of a material particle called . . .

Anish: Moment of singularity, Sanatan.

Sanatan: Thanks, Anish. I am having a senior moment there.

Sevak: It's too early, Sanatan.

Sanatan: I never see you with a senior moment, Sevakji, even though you are the most senior among us. So, as long as you keep inspiring us, we are safe from senior moments?

Sevak: Don't count on it, anybody! We all are getting there, albeit slowly.

Sanskriti: You're making me nervous, Sevakji.

Mahila: Let me then take it over again. So, Darshana inspires deeper questions, which turn out to be substantial puzzles that refuse to be resolved. Is our faith in Hinduism a legitimate belief in light of these issues such as hard and soft social facts and target M and mind? The big questions leave big holes in my mind.

Anish: If indeed there is anything like mind in the first place!

Mahila: You are aggravating me, Anish!

Darshana: At least I am not getting the blame this time.

Mahila: How much philosophy can we take? How much should we? To what end and purpose?

Darshana: Power to you, Mahila, you are asking nothing but philosophical questions.

Mahila: My God, Krishna! Help me!

Madhyama: This is not helping us exemplify building on the foundations. I want to ask Mahila if she wants to present some non-philosophical bricks and mortar or even furniture in our building.

Mahila: Good question, Madhyama. And thank you for extracting me from philosophy. I do want to narrate one idea from Hinduism and develop it in terms of social practice. How would Darshana or Sevakji feel?

Darshana: Go ahead, Mahila. Philosophy is always timely and timeless. But we got other things to do too, I suppose.

Sevak: Yes, Mahila, please tell us about what you want to bring up from Hinduism to build a structure on our foundations?

Mahila: This is an offshoot from my conversation with Sevakji when I saw him to talk about my building further Hinduism. We were talking

about a number of practices and rituals that Hindus engage in at social level. One of those is called *pancha-maha-yajna* which involves paying our debt to five aspects of our environment and that caught my attention.

Sanskriti: I am free of all and any debt. Deficit spending is not my cup of tea. My financial management is very sound, thanks to the help and support from my husband. So, thanks but no thanks, Mahila.

Mahila: No, Sanskriti, according to this idea of the Hindu scriptures, each of us is born with debts to five aspects of the environment which we must reciprocate every day.

Sanskriti: What made me think that Hinduism was easy! I am getting loaded with debt to five people that I cannot pay even till I die? Anyway, I am not the one to retreat in face of a challenge, Mahila. Tell me all about my debts to these people.

Mahila: Well, in a way they are all people. Of different sorts, though. The first group comprises sages who did so much for us, especially Hindus. The Hindu sages of yore sacrificed enormously their time and resources to leave us with revealed scriptures that continue to inspire us and move us forward along the path of moral and spiritual life. The sages, called *rishis*, do not want anything for themselves, for they are selfless to the core. But we certainly owe a great deal to them. So, how do we discharge our debt to them? By reading and studying their writings every day.

Sanskriti: I take back my concern, Mahila. I realize and agree that we all have a tremendous debt to our sages and the least we can do is to study their writings which are for our own good. Of course there is so much here to read and study that it can take us more than a lifetime to finish it all.

Mahila: Very true, Sanskriti. Everyone can choose their core texts for this purpose. Or, they can seek guidance from their guru. The next group is that of ancestors. If sages have left us timeless wisdom, our ancestors have left us the historical tradition, which we go by in all we do when we live a normal life. This includes the way we eat, drink, dress, groom, live, speak, mingle and so on. The traditional Hindu way to pay their debt is to make food oblations to the ancestors, which makes for giving up a little as a symbolic gesture and remembering what they have left for us that we continue to use and benefit from. But my social

work helps me to reconfigure the way we pay back our debt to them. We can repay by doing something within our community to pass on the heritage and legacy we received. We can do this through education and communication, for example. Again, the term ancestors can be understood in a wide sense of the term. In olden days it could refer mainly to the ancestral lineage of our forefathers. Now is the time we can think of it as including scientists, authors, writers, thinkers, artists, musicians and so on whose work we enjoy and relish. Thinking about their legacy to us we can spend some time every day furthering their work, image or memories. If, for instance, it is Kalidasa, a great poet of Sanskrit that one of us regards as a great source of aesthetic enjoyment, he or she can spend time and resources in making Kalidasa's work known. Or, one can simply convey what one has received to others who have an interest or want to cultivate a literary interest.

Sanskriti: I can devote time and energy to raising public awareness about Bharata-muni who wrote the famous *Natya-shastra* that my dance draws from immensely. But, Mahila, I do this work anyway.

Mahila: That's great, Sanskriti, you are already paying one debt in one way.

Navin: Gandhi's fourteen-point constructive program is something I can look at as a piece in paying the five big debts. Thanks, Mahila, for making a reform a part of the Hindu tradition.

Sanatan: Welcome to the Hindu tradition, Navin.

Navin: In this case, I am glad to return there. Especially when it's not going to make me change anything in my life or thought in this regard.

Sanatan: Not having to change is what a tradition is made of, Navin.

Navin: You got me there, Sanatan!

Mahila: Let me move on. The third group is that of gods. If we take them as gods of nature then we can think of them as natural, even including social, energies that we utilize in our life. Or we can think of them as the social facts and reality that surround us presently. So, sages gave us timeless wisdom. Ancestors gave us the tradition. Gods give us the present. We are able to function at all in life and in society with the help of whatever energies we need for that purpose. Whatever

contributes presently, moment by moment, to our functionality is a gift from gods, from this perspective and we need to reciprocate accordingly. We can ask our own conscience, as we do with respect to the four universal virtues of human relationships, where our debt lies in this regard and do what we can to pay it back in ways our conscience helps us think it up.

Navin: This may suggest new items in the constructive program. More work for a reformist to do.

Sanatan: Does not leave me workless either. Conservatives can think of ways of educating people in the value of what is good in the tradition. If society is losing steam on this, there is work to do to rejuvenate or reconstruct the society accordingly. So, conservatives would have a reconstructive program while you reformists have your constructive program, Navin.

Navin: Whichever way, we must work together and as selflessly as we can to do good for the humanity, right?

Sanatan: I can't disagree with that, Navin.

Mahila: Talking about humanity, that exactly is the fourth group to whom we owe one big debt. All human beings are next in line to receive our reciprocation for what they have done for us as a group. If gods can be understood to represent current present energies in the environment that contribute to our functionality, humans together give us our social, economic and political rights, privileges, protections and various means of support to help our social life. In the Hindu tradition, we discharge this debt by providing hospitality to uninvited guests.

Sanskriti: I see the point, Mahila. I often invite lots of people to my parties. But often there are business strings or other strings attached to it. Serving an uninvited guest is a true good test of our regard for humanity that the Hindu tradition requires us to inculcate. Hospitality, anyone?!

Anish: But this too can be modified as we think individually about the ways we can repay our debts. I like the whole idea. It has a ring of ethical truth to it, the whole notion of paying back debt. It leaves us with great freedom in interpreting the points of debt and customizing our ways of paying the debts. It also instills in us a sense of humility and modesty, with a readiness to relate with the environment.

Sanatan: Absolutely. At the same time, we will be following the great Hindu tradition.

Navin: And work for needed reforms at the same time.

Madhyama: This is great building on the foundations, Mahila.

Mahila: Thank you. So, the debt to humanity can be paid by attending to the needs of strangers. How about that? If all humans set aside some time for such actual service of humanity we can go a long way toward easing many difficult situations in our midst.

Sanskriti: I don't think I mind paying these debts at all. Mahila, what is the fifth debt?

Mahila: The first ritual offering or debt-paying is to the sages or *rishis*. The second is to the ancestors, called the *pitris*. The third is to gods or *devas*. The fourth is to humans or *manushyas*. The last is to *bhutas* which may be taken to mean the entire life kingdom, including the vegetable kingdom as well as the animal kingdom. Or, the entire ecosystem, if you will. We often hear the contemporary eulogizing of what we owe to the ecological environment and how we are holistically locked into its intricate internal balances and reciprocal processes. If we not only feel being part of the ecosystem but as indebted to it as a large part of our identity and work, we must devise each his or her own ways of reciprocating in order to relieve our continuous debt to the environment. We can formulate our individual or even group visions of what we can do and implement it in reality.

Darshana: Without worrying about whether it is physical or social or moral or spiritual reality and the philosophical nuances thereof.

Sevak: People, I knew that Darshana was and is a friend!

All: Sure.

Mahila: I am done with my building, folks.

Madhyama: That was wonderful. Thank you, Mahila. Now, it is Sanskriti's turn.

Sanskriti: Now, folks. You realize we've done a lot of long-face stuff around here. Thank God that we had some light moments. What I say may, for a change, lighten up things a bit. Anish took us in the depths of science struggling with consciousness. Previous to that, though, he gave a good open piece of his mind thoroughly on each and every item of our big sixteen foundation stones. Mahila extended the depth dimension to physical and social facts. However, she relieved us with a debt issue that hits all thinking beings hard, challenging them to pony up their debts, in a poignant fashion. But I am not going to extract my pound of flesh from you guys.

Let me start with a Sanskrit verse, which is very convenient for me in relation to my life in general. Bhartri-hari, a famous king, ascetic and spiritual seeker has said: *sahitya-sangita-kala-vihinah sakshat pashuh pucchha-vishana-hinah, trinam na khadan api jivamanas tad bhagadheyam paramam pashunam.* It means: Celebrate the great good fortune of grass-grazing animals that an ostensive man, who has no sense of art, music or literature, goes around without tail or horns and without eating grass. So, if you know someone who has no taste in art, music or literature you know what sort of animal Bhartri-hari was talking about!

Madhyama: That is a devastating irony, Sanskriti. Do you see some such in business?

Sanskriti: Plenty of businessmen fall in this category. But some of them, hypocritically, are big patrons of art, music and literature.

Darshana: We live in a world of paradoxes.

Sevak: We await philosophers taking us out of them some time.

Darshana: Sevakji, what did I do that you are hitting me with a vengeful moment?

Sevak: Darshana, I am human, too. A little piece of humor won't hurt you.

Darshana: Only this time I'll let you get away with what you call a sense of humor. Just kidding. I am having fun with you guys.

Sevak: Darshana is a great sport too.

Mahila: But she is Maha-Kali too with sharp missiles in her eight arms. They are all different philosophical positions and she can throw anything at you any time no matter what you are talking about.

Anish: Just eight?

Darshana: Hey people, you're testing the limits of my sporting spirit?!

Sevak: No, Goddess, we are just trying to pay our debt to you. But apparently we are doing such a poor job of it. We should coat it with some philosophy.

Darshana: Hey guys, do you want to put a short leash on your facilitator?

Sevak: Well, that brings me to my senses. Sanskriti, go ahead with your building.

Sanskriti: I am glad we can shed our long face mode and be life-like somewhat. Yes, I have the support of the great Bhartri-hari in pursuing my inclination for art, music and literature. Anish represented a perspective relating to natural and life sciences. Mahila did that from a perspective relating with social sciences. I am expected to bring a perspective from arts and humanities to round up the panorama of modern knowledge or at least to touch on the three big branches of academia.

Darshana: I am glad, Sanskriti, you said we are just touching on them. They are enormously vast and we may never be able to even glimpse them adequately.

Sanskriti: True, Darshana. We are like the legendary bird that just wants to fly. It cannot go to the other end of the sky but will fly and try what it can do any way. That metaphor is used with respect to item ten in our list of sixteen: There are many ways of speaking about the infinite ultimate. Even great sages to whom the ultimate revealed itself can only say so much and that too in parables, paradoxes and metaphors. Sorry, Darshana, but logic seems to have its challenge cut out when it comes down to the infinite ultimate.

Darshana: It's apparently so, Sanskriti. Big problem occurs when the followers of a sage decide that their sage-guru said the only truth, the

whole truth and nothing but the truth. They start fighting all other sage-gurus who seem to be saying anything even a tiny bit different.

Sanskriti: Yes, Darshana, I am reminded of the classic metaphor in the Hindu literature likening these paltry followers to blind men trying to figure out what a whole elephant is like. One with the tail in hand says the elephant is like a rope, another with a leg in hand says it's like a pillar and so on. Which blind person can really describe an elephant? But the petty theological infighting goes on for millennia with people still fighting. Hinduism takes a solid look at the whole bunch of utterances from the blind people and not claiming to be an exclusive seer wisely declares that the elephant is beyond anyone's or any group's capacity to describe in full accurate detail. It is a great pity that world religions cannot bring themselves together to say some such thing or to appreciate what Hinduism has to say on it which makes all the sense on the matter.

Sevak: Well, the exclusivist infighting will rage on beyond our lifetime. So, don't hold your hopes high that some miraculous turn of events will bring fruitlessly fighting exclusivists to see the wisdom of productive inclusivism like that of Hinduism.

Darshana: True, Sevakji, we should not let go of real likelihood as we work hard as we can to change things for better and for good of all humanity. We keep going and the world keeps going too.

Madhyama: Sanskriti, please continue.

Sanskriti: Now, I am going to bring up something that may prove to be light and funny as against heavy and profound. I do not have a scriptural source but I have heard somewhere that a traditional Hindu woman automatically gets one half of her husband's good *karma*!

Mahila: I don't know whether to call it anti-woman or pro-woman: it hits me in a strange way. But I am perhaps taking it too seriously.

Sanskriti: Let's not look at it as a men's or women's thing. Let's try to view it for simple Hindu folks. How would it impact them?

Madhyama: No Vedic ritual can be performed without the wife, because husband is not a complete unit in and by himself, always needing his wife by his side to form a unitary household reality necessary for the

performance of any ritual. It is often said that wife is husband's half the body, *ardhangana*, you know.

Mahila: I've seen many a woman who is more than three quarters of her copular weight.

Anish: Yes, she can literally blow her husband away!

Sanskriti: Fun apart, it seems to me that this is a sort of recognition of the contribution of woman in the household and a way of being fair to her in view of her sacrifices which she makes willingly or unwillingly but makes them nevertheless. That is why I said a traditional Hindu woman. Or, maybe any woman in the tradition of any culture who makes equivalent sacrifices and contribution deserves half of the good that her husband does. Of course you cannot force her to take the half of his bad *karma*. Then my version is that she must wear a sari to show that she is a traditional Hindu woman. If you are in a three piece lady suit you are striking on your own and so you will be left on your own at the mercy of whatever your husband wants to give you! Let me see how this rubs you people and which way!

Mahila: Sanskriti, what made me think that only Darshana can get us in a thought bind? Your statement, whether it comes from scripture or not, presents a pretty interesting dilemma. We feminists talk loudly about women's suffering but we also put down the same traditional women as decadent compared to the so-called working women who of course are out to emulate and challenge men's careers. Would we be willing to grant the fact that there is such suffering, which deserves reciprocation in karmic terms?

The way I know feminists, they would try to find some clever ways to get out of having to accord credit to these suffering women though they want to gather behind their back and shout at men hiding behind these traditional women, so to say. They will do this simply because they cannot identify with those women whom they regard with low esteem. It does not occur to them that imitating men does not show any creativity or originality either. In fact it is backhanded masculinism. Of course the nature versus nurture battle goes on with respect to how far wide and deep the differences between genders go beyond biological features. We talked about essentialism and anti-essentialism in a previous context and Darshana explained to us its political aspects. Maybe I am venting a rant. But I am thrown into a kind of whirl. My

feminist background both helps me and does not help me to tackle this for simple Hindu folks as Sanskriti puts it.

Madhyama: The karmic demand of fairness is clear as I see it. If we acknowledge that traditional woman suffers because of the tradition or makes sacrifices to uphold the tradition making other people's path easier, she does deserve a reward for that. Denying such reward occurs only because of a social value devalorization of the work of a traditional woman. But you cannot have it both ways. Either recognize the work and make a fair award or stop talking about women's suffering in order to promote the new woman and her career life. We want to have it both ways. Only way of getting out of this is to call logic names.

Darshana: You just can't call logic names. You owe so much to it. Some talk about not being logocentric. I have thought a lot about that but it does not sound much more than a convenient cover. To be consistent, I won't protect Hinduism either hiding behind such cover.

Sevak: Darshana, you need to explain what is involved here.

Darshana: Sorry, Sevakji. Yes, I must explain a bit. It's interesting it is Sanskriti who touched our feminist nerve. I thought it would be Mahila.

Mahila: You know, Darshana, I am not the same firebrand feminist I used to be a decade ago.

Darshana: You are telling me, Mahila. I had a hard time restraining you!

Mahila: Those were the days! But I am much at peace now, following my Mira and moving toward my Krishna. Still, don't confuse my Krishna with that of the Hare Krishnas!

Darshana: We won't, Mahila. Yours is a spiritual feminism. Was it not a Hare Krishna bigwig who insulted Mira in Vrindavan saying that he does not see women?

Mahila: I cannot say for sure but it surely was a fake devotee of Krishna. Mira was great in retorting that she knew of no man other than Krishna.

Madhyama: A great rejoinder.

Sanskriti: I am a sort of traditional Hindu woman, though I bear a goodly touch of modernism. So, I won't claim more than quarter of my husband's good *karma*. And he is happy with it.

Sanatan: Better keep a quarter than lose a half?

Sanskriti: You men are really calculating, eh?

Navin: Sanatan, think twice before you say anything to today's woman. She may come back and bite you.

Sanatan: Old dogs take time learning new tricks, Navin!

Sanskriti: Have patience, girls!

Madhyama: We will! Sanskriti, do you have more bricks to go on the foundation?

Sanskriti: As you know I like festivities, especially Hindu festivities. I want to talk about four major Hindu festivals. There are quite a few Hindu holy days when we engage in festivities and celebration. I want to choose four of them to make this point. *Raksha-bandhan* or *balev*, *vijaya dashami* or *dasera*, *dipavali* or *divali* and *holi* are four wonderfully conceived holidays that go to the heart of Hindu culture. *Raksha-bandhan* is the day in the middle of the monsoon season when the *brahmanas* or educators and priests change their sacred thread and renew their dedication to moral and spiritual life for the good of the community. The beauty is that all other three classes also get a protective thread in the form of *raksha*, which is sisters' blessing for their brothers thus involving all men and women. *Vijaya dashami* is the day a little less than two months later when we celebrate lord Rama's victory over the demon Ravana. At this time everyone, meaning all the four classes participate and celebrate in the festivities where they burn the effigy of Ravana with *kshatriyas* or guardians of the community symbolically shooting off arrows at the effigy.

In about three weeks after that, near the harvest time, we have the celebration of the festival of lights with the traditional firework going off. For many the next day is also the new-year day. But at this time it is the turn of the *vaishyas* or the merchants and farmers to lead and they celebrate, closing their books of account to mark the end of the year and asking for blessings of the goddess of wealth, Mother Lakshmi. They mark the beginning of their new books of account with the symbols

"*Shri*" and "1.25", symbolizing that they will try to earn no more than twenty-five per cent of their capital or investment for the next year. The idea that they want to cap their profits committing themselves to the limit or cap of twenty-five per cent is commendable as showing their resolve not to profiteer but to make an honest buck and harmonize with other three classes. All other three classes celebrate with lines of lamps lighted up in beautiful patterns inviting Mother Lakshmi to their homes.

Capping off this line of mutually participatory celebrations is holi or the festival of colors four and a half months later when the leadership moves to the *shudras* or artisans and workers who lead with the symbolic burning of the demoness Holika who burnt herself to death in her evil attempt to burn the legendary child devotee Prahlada. Lovely drumbeats celebrate the destruction of the demoness and all classes of people smear each other in a medley of gorgeous lively colors. Instead of class wars thus major Hindu festivals have found ways to symbolize and enact class harmony.

Madhyama: What a beautiful way to portray our major festivals connecting with community solidarity through year-round quartet of festivals! Thank you, Sanskriti for a lovely vision. This is a beautiful brick going into the building on the sixteen foundation stones. Do you have more bricks, Sanskriti?

Sanskriti: I am done, Madhyama!

Madhyama: I see no one wanting to take issues with the shape of Sanskriti's bricks. In fact I see people nodding especially with her last brick. We have completed third item in our five-item agenda for today's session. I think we have achieved the goal of illustrating how further building can be done on the basis of the sixteen-fold foundation of Hinduism for Today. Sevakji, Darshana, am I right?

Sevak: Yes, Madhyama. Anish, Mahila and Sanskriti made fine contributions by providing bricks and mortar or aesthetically pleasing furniture – depending on the metaphor we want to use – that goes a long way to show how further building can be done on the sixteen-item basis. Nothing they said contradicts the sixteen and actually enriches the coherence of the sixteen. It only shows how original and innovative, creative and positive buildings can be raised, promoting individual freedom and community building at the same time. Good job, Anish, Mahila, Sanskriti!

Darshana: I want to echo what Sevakji said. Congratulations for a fine work, Anish, Mahila, Sanskriti!

Anish, Mahila, Sanskriti: Thank you, Sevakji, Darshana!

Madhyama: The fourth item is a free-for-all where everyone can make any further statements as they see fit. I have a proposal here. The fifth item will be asking everyone on how the seminar has changed them. That will be a good time to do the work of the fourth item. So, instead of the fourth item of the free-for-all I would rather like Sevakji and Darshana to contribute ideas from their repertoire giving us further example of bricks and mortar or furniture.

Sanatan: Anish, Mahila and Sanskriti have already provided the bricks and mortar, I would say. It is time to move the metaphor further ahead. How about saying Sevakji and Darshana will now provide beautiful pieces of furniture that will complete the idea in the construction metaphor?

Navin: I support Sanatan's idea. It will round up everything we have been doing. I am sure Sevakji and Darshana will make inspirational contribution that will enrich and sort of complete our construction.

Madhyama: That's good note of harmony between our two voices of conservatism and reformism. I don't think Sevakji and Darshana will refuse the invitation.

Sevak: We indeed can't. Things have worked out well so far. I will make a contribution. Darshana, how do you feel or, rather, what do you think?

Darshana: I will make a contribution too. Let me go first, so Sevakji will have the last word, so to say, on the construction side of our Hinduism for Today

Madhyama: Everyone nods in agreement. Darshana, please go ahead.

Darshana: This point is something I have been pondering for a while. It integrates Hindu creation story with a metaphysical vision that fits the spirit of Hindu thought. You know that Hindu creation story is presented in a variety of ways, befitting the notion in our item ten of the foundations, namely, that the one spiritual being can be thought of in

many ways. One major way is to affirm the oscillating theory of the universe where the universe becomes manifest, expands and is dissembled back into a state of dormancy or hibernation.

Anish: This would be like Big Bang to Big Crunch and another cycle of Big Bang to Big Crunch and so on. Scientists currently are not sure if there would be a Big Crunch, as envisaged in the Hindu thought. They think it depends on the amount of matter in the universe. If there is a large enough amount, its gravity can initiate the Big Crunch. Since the nature and quantity of the so-called dark matter is not yet determined, the scientific community tends to think the current expansion following the Big Bang about fourteen billion years ago should go on indefinitely. But the cyclical oscillation theory makes for a more coherent story than the pointless indefinite expansion and dissipation into the vastness of space.

Darshana: Anyway, there seems to be hope that science will eventually confirm the cyclical theory that is the heart of the Hindu sages' intuition. The point I want to make is about the Hindu trinity of Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva who respectively initiate the Big Bang, sustenance and the Big Crunch in collaboration with their female energy counterparts called Sarasvati, Lakshmi and Shakti respectively. We can extend this cyclical creation story into a wider metaphysical sphere.

I suggest that while at the macrocosmic level god Brahma is that aspect of the one spiritual being behind the universe that, accompanied by his energy portrayed as the goddess Sarasvati, makes the universe manifest at the beginning of time, he also together with his formative energy is responsible for anything and everything that comes into being at the microcosmic level any time after the cosmic level Big Bang that he and Sarasvati preside over.

Similarly, the sustaining form is symbolized as god Vishnu who, together with his consort goddess Lakshmi, maintains the identity of the universe manifested by Brahma and Sarasvati. He and Lakshmi then sort of look after the universe, which then proceeds to stay on for its manifest life which, as we know, extends for billions of years. At the macrocosmic level they preside over the sustenance and orderly maintenance of the universe but at the microcosmic level they also look after the identity maintenance of any entity as long as the entity lasts. Any hypocosmic entity that comes into being after the Big Bang of course will dissemble before the Big Crunch, some lasting a few seconds while others lasting millions of years.

Finally, god Shiva and his energy counterpart goddess Shakti together make for the Big Crunch, initiating and completing the latter at

the macrocosmic level, issuing into the big dance of dissolution or deconstruction that is envisaged in Hindu scriptures. I guess Sanskriti has often portrayed this dance in her performances.

Sanskriti: Yes, Darshana, each time that I have portrayed in classical dance form the creation and dissolution cycle I have been filled with a great exhilarating sense of magnificence that takes you beyond the routine travails of life into a blissful state that kind of exists beyond everything that moves and keeps moving us here in this little life-world of ours.

Darshana: That is truly inspirational, Sanskriti, and so well put. To continue, god Shiva and goddess Shakti also take over every entity that has spent its time as that entity and is about to dissemble. They preside over its dissolution until god Brahma and goddess Sarasvati take it over when time comes for the birth or manifestation of the entity in another form.

In this way three couples rule the universe and preside over its birth, maintenance and dissolution at both macrocosmic and microcosmic levels. We can thus understand ourselves and everything that we perceive as manifesting through the formative processes initiated and implemented by the relative Brahma and Sarasvati forces involved. Everything maintains its identity so given to it by Brahma and Sarasvati as long as Vishnu and Lakshmi operate in it. It then is dissolved when its Shiva and Shakti forces take over. So, the trinity is made into three couples, which operate in the universe and life-world in various ways that we keep perceiving through our lifetime.

Madhyama: Darshana, that indeed is a grand representation of the Hindu creation story at a metaphysical level that encompasses both macro and micro aspects. Indeed, this is a great contribution.

Anish: Its symbolism is gripping and transcends mere mythology. It transforms the story into an account that may be something that science may confirm one day. Even as presented it does not seem to flatly contradict science. The idea that gods symbolize forms or fields of energy and goddesses symbolize energies themselves is attractive to my scientific attitude. I am not a subscriber to scientism, as you know.

Navin: Can you elaborate a bit on scientism, Anish?

Anish: Briefly, scientism turns science into a religion whereby it becomes a form of dogmatic belief which makes science, its method and tentative conclusions into exclusive truth and litmus test for the veracity of anything in the world. All and everything in the universe, according to this view, is under the purview of science and science is kind of omniscient. Whatever is it that science cannot handle is promptly branded as unscientific and is said to not exist or to be fraudulent. Some materialists that I know subscribe to this kind of blind and thoughtless dogmatism. It is unthinkable to them that anything other than science can be true in any way. Pursuing this vision, they try to reduce everything to things and principles currently accepted by science. Did I get it right, Darshana?

Darshana: You did, Anish, except that my academic manners won't allow me to put it so bluntly.

Mahila: To me Darshana's vision beckons science and invites it to come to it and join it in a dance of all-encompassing metaphysical harmony.

Madhyama: Sevakji, your turn.

Sevak: First of all, I want to commend Darshana for interpreting the Hindu trinity in a metaphysical form that is strikingly coherent and rational. The idea of three divine couples running the universe as sort of emanations from the one spiritual being taking triple forms of energy and housing the appropriate energies themselves definitely should appeal to the Hindu mind and impact it favorably. Thank you, Darshana for this highly creditworthy contribution to our foundations.

Darshana: You are welcome, Sevakji.

Sevak: Turning to my point of contribution I must say I am going to moralize a bit. My offering will complement Darshana's grand vision of cosmic processes by infusing in it an ethical aspect of human life-world. The *Bhagavad-gita* talks about three concepts called *yajna*, *dana* and *tapas* and holds them as purificatory for all humans. Our own item nine in the list of sixteen includes *shuchi* or purity as a universal virtue of human relationships. The notion of purity or *shuchi* appears to some as sanctimonious, so we also have adopted and included another term along with it, called *atma-shuddhi* or self-purification which, if I remember correctly, was recommended by Navin as a term that Mahatma Gandhi and his followers often used in the context of Gandhi's fasts for expiating

an act of violence on the part of his followers. Navin, do you want to add anything here?

Navin: Gandhi was quick to accept personal responsibility for any violence on the part of any of his followers. He underwent fasts to purify himself of something in him that was unable to totally convince all his followers that no violence should ever be practiced even by error. This extraordinary sensitivity can occur and be exhibited only by a highly accomplished sage and no wonder many have regarded Gandhi as a modern day sage in the age-old tradition of rearing sages in Hinduism. Self-purification or *atma-shuddhi*, hence, was for Gandhi and Gandhians an important aspect of their life. It set a clear but hard example to follow.

Sevak: Thank you, Navin, for shedding light on the Mahatma's adoption of the term *atma-shuddhi* or self-purification. Shri-Krishna says in the chapter eighteen, verse five of the Gita: *Yajna-dana-tapah-karma na tyajyam karyam eva tat, yajno danam tapash chaiva pavanani manishinam*. It means: positive reciprocity, charity and austerity should never be given up and must always be practiced, for they are purificatory for all thinking humans.

I want to offer an interpretation of the three qualities or virtues that Shri-Krishna has asked all humans to develop or practice all the time. The term *yajna* is often understood as nothing but sacrificial ritual of the Vedic type. Indeed various types of *yajna* are ordained and elaborated in the Vedic literature. The Gita itself points out their limitations and criticizes people who are obsessed with them. So, why in the last chapter of the Gita Shri-Krishna is suddenly asking everyone to perform yajna always and never giving it up?

In the third chapter, verses ten and fourteen Shri-Krishna places *yajna* at the beginning of creation and establishes it as one essential element in the world cycle. These are some of the most difficult verses in the book and have been interpreted in all kinds of wild manners by almost all commentators. *Yajna* is interpreted by some as selfless action and by some as *karma-kanda* or Vedic ritual. Nothing fits the verses. Then there are other places where the term *yajna* is used in different contexts. I won't go into all sorts of detail here but will refer to the work of Pandit Madhusudan Ojha that I previously alluded to. Ojha was a prolific scholar and writer who authored nearly two hundred volumes in Sanskrit focusing on the Vedas and their interpretation. Very little of his work is known, especially in the West. After a great deal of research he concluded that the term *yajna* is used primarily to indicate the reciprocal

operations of energies in the universe. Let us take the human example, which is the point in question here. When a human is born it is obvious that it won't survive without food. It got to do something to get food. A newborn cries to attract mother who feeds it. Later it learns to output energies to find or earn food. It finds that that is the only way it would survive. Notice that the term food or *anna* here signifies everything that a living being needs from outside in order to secure its survival. Beings may need all sorts of things to survive: they are all food for them. The dependence of every being on food is therefore a reality that forces it to output energy in order to find food from the environment. No food is found without such output.

But more importantly, if output occurs, food has to be found. This is the birth of the theory of *karma* or reciprocal accounting for one's actions. That is why the third chapter of the Gita puts *yajna* at the top of creation. Selfless action is good as a path to reach *moksha* but it is not an ingredient in the survival of the universe. Nor does it belong at the top of the creation, where it has little functionality. But obtaining food is essential for survival. Having to make an effort to find food is the obligation of a living being and having made the effort rewarding it with food is the obligation of the gods or energy forms in the environment. It is this reciprocal cycle that is the famous cycle or *chakra* proclaimed in verse sixteen of chapter three. It gives pride of place to *yajna*. So, *yajna* in its most Vedic sense means what I need to do to deserve whatever food I need or seek. If I make the effort, spend the energies and do my part, I am guaranteed that I will have the food, sooner or later. So the entire system jibes in with the law of *karma*, which connects with *yajna* at the human level.

Sorry for the long background material. But I think I could not have made the point without it. The point is that *yajna* in this sense is an absolute must for everyone who wants to participate in the life-world as a productive and contributing member of the society without becoming a parasite on it asking for a free lunch. Such a person is harshly called a thief by Shri-Krishna in chapter three, somewhere. Where, Sanatan?

Sanatan: Chapter three, verse twelve, Sevakji.

Sevak: Thank you, Sanatan. You may see now why I translate the term yajna as positive reciprocity, which is a complex term but I do not know a simple word that would work here. It is not the pernicious reciprocity where someone refuses to do something unless someone does something. It is the fulfilling of one's obligation to earn everything that one takes in, uses or enjoys. If you pay the price, it is *yajna-shishta-amrita*, that is,

the nectar that keeps you immortal from life after life. If you don't, you're a thief or a parasite.

The term *paraspara* or mutual reciprocity is used in chapter three, verse eleven to indicate how the ecosystem provides the food if we do our part in contributing our energies to it. In the Gita's view the life-world system depends on this reciprocity or *yajna*. Because the world was produced along with *yajna*, as per chapter three, verse ten, this *yajna* is at the root of the life-world system. Those who try to believe that the world is not reciprocally based are called demonic in chapter sixteen, which verse, Sanatan?

Sanatan: Verse eight there, Sevakji.

Sevak: So, all this is to establish having to work to deserve food and asking for no more than what one has earned by one's own effort. That is the most appropriate meaning of the term *yajna*. Simply speaking, "give and take" or fair exchange. The other two virtues that we are asked to imbibe in chapter eighteen, verse five, are *dana* and *tapas*. *Dana* is of course charity which, in this context, I would take to mean "giving more than taking" or the excess of giving over taking. *Tapas* means austerity but in this context of *yajna* it is better understood as "taking less than giving." So, if we practice fair give and take, giving more than taking and taking less than giving, we purify ourselves. The point of self-purification that Shri-Krishna enshrines in chapter eighteen, verse five is that these three will purify any person's heart and open his or her mind to the existence itself. No wonder chapter seventeen, verse twenty-seven says that, if you establish yourself in these three qualities, you are one with existence or good.

Darshana: Sevakji, maybe this is where Plato got his idea of the unity of Good with existence! But what Eurocentrist will allow his hallowed Plato to be influenced by the "murky" East, even though hardly anyone agrees with Plato on this?

Sevak: So, my point of moralizing is just this: purify yourself by give and take, by giving more and by taking less. Long way to come to a simple point, finally!

Sanatan: But it was so much worth it, Sevakji. I learned a lot about the Gita's true meaning of the term *yajna*. I doubt I could have picked this up anywhere. Believe me, I have read more than a hundred works on the Gita but I have not seen this profound rendering of *yajna*.

Anish: What I like about it is the way it really locks in with Darshana's metaphysical vision of energies. I can see many implications that can be drawn to make a highly coherent system of concepts that even work with science. Combining the ethical with the scientific is one of my dreams. This gives me a lot to work on in a truly promising way. What do you think, Darshana?

Darshana: You are right, Anish. Philosophically, this entire interpretation coming from Sevakji, due to Ojha's illustrious work, bears much promise and can go a long way in uniting ethics with metaphysics. G. E. Moore thought it was a naturalistic fallacy to try to derive ought from is. The idea of this being a fallacy even goes back to David Hume. But this entire system of Ojha can make you to see the matter in a different and original light. There are fundamental implications leading to derivations that can be philosophically very productive. So, Sevakji had his last word regarding our contributions toward constructing a Hinduism for Today. And it was highly enlightening and inspiring at the same time. Thank you, Sevakji.

Madhyama: Thank you, Sevakji.

Sevak: You are welcome.

Madhyama: Can we turn to our last item of today's five piece agenda? I can't believe we are near the end of the seminar. On the one hand I see that we are all very pleased with the outcome. On the other hand, I see that we do not want to quit and are sad that we have to end this beautiful and worthwhile endeavor. But don't all good things come to an end?

Sanskriti: I have a suggestion for the kind of music that will fit the occasion.

Madhyama: What is it, Sanskriti?

Sanskriti: For a bittersweet occasion, such as wedding where you rejoice at the two souls joining their lives and are sad to see the bride leave her folks, the best music is shehnai. It is so traditional and so exhilarating at the same time very uplifting with its innocent bird chirping style of sounds. I have a recording of the greatest shehnai player, Ustad Bismillah Khan. It is in raga Bhairavi which, in our tradition, most fittingly marks the end of concerts. This seminar has been like an

intellectual concert. Let us end it symbolically with Bhairavi played by Bismillah on shehnai.

Madhyama: We'll do it, Sanskriti. Thank you for a lovely and fitting suggestion. It is music to my ears. But let us turn to the last item on our agenda. It is everyone taking turns to say how the seminar has changed him or her.

Anish: I will go first. I have covered the matter at some length already. The seminar has changed me from being an atheistic Hindu to being an agnostic Hindu. But I am solidly a Hindu and am pleased with the sixteen items on our foundation list together with the buildings exemplified by contributions from Mahila, Sanskriti, Darshana and Sevakji.

Madhyama: And yourself, Anish.

Anish: Let us not forget the contributions of Navin, Sanatan and Madhyama in getting to our foundation stones in the first place. It's no less than fantastic to note that everyone contributed substantially and we achieved our result through a harmony of intellectual and spiritually oriented contributions of thoughts after thoughts.

Darshana: I cannot believe how I enjoyed and benefitted from this seminar. It turned out to be fruitful and insightful in so many ways that I lose count. How has it changed me? In many ways. One is that I have come to see the place of philosophy in the seminar both positively and otherwise. Positively, in the sense that philosophy helped us not only to analyze matters, but to clarify things and make them cogent. Otherwise, in the sense that philosophy was made to work with and for the general good, for Hindus as well as for the humanity. I discern wonderful contributions by everybody, leading to a result that we should feel good for a long time.

Madhyama: The seminar tried my moderating skills of resolving conflicts but the help I got from Sevakji, Darshana and everyone else made it all worthwhile. I am deeply satisfied with the result and inspired by it as well. Seminar changed me in that I am coming out of it as a more deeply informed Hindu than I ever thought possible. It is really more than that. I am not simply more informed. I feel I am a better Hindu already and a better human being as I absorb the impact of the seminar on my life.

Mahila: The seminar gave me more than I gave it. In that it has become a graceful gift from all of you to me. May I be worthy of it. My spirit of *yajna* beckons me to repay the grace by working hard to communicate my learning to the wider audience both Hindu and other. The message of Hinduism I have gotten is extremely worthwhile. It is going to make me a better spiritual seeker. It has strengthened my journey on the path of spiritual feminism, emulating Mira. I am not ready to drink poison.

Darshana: Thinking of it, Mahila, I am not ready for any kind of hemlock either.

Mahila: But I am ready to swallow the travails of life and particularly my career of social work. My Hindu learning from the seminar will stand me a good stead in this. I can see myself deriving strength and inspiration continually as I move forward.

Navin: This seminar has worked for me better than many I have attended. It has given me light and solaced me in many ways, making me spiritually stronger. I must say I have come to understand Hindu conservatism more deeply and more sympathetically as a result of participating with everyone here. Particularly, I have come to appreciate the conservative viewpoint that Sanatan has offered. It is truly enlightening and reassuring. I have not turned a conservative but have gotten closer to conservatism as a result.

Sanatan: I want to say something similar, of course from the other end of the spectrum. This seminar was not a converting device, with a secret agenda to ultimately convert everybody into parroting a preordained set of doctrines. Our foundations came to all of us as a self-discovery after lengthy discussions ranging far and wide over a vast terrain. Hinduism is a vast ocean but we explored a lot in all directions and came up with gems that it's a beauty to see how such a diverse group of Hindus can find identity with it. In the process I came close to appreciating the reform side of Hinduism. Navin presented a very attractive point of view on Hinduism. I too have not quite become a reformist Hindu, but I have come closer to Navin, much closer than I thought I could. The work to communicate and engage the community of thinkers into dialog about issues involved lies ahead. It can be daunting but I think it is made easier with the groundwork that we have already laid in the seminar.

Sanskriti: I agree with Sanatan that Hinduism is a vast ocean. From my point of view as a practicing artist, I get overwhelmed when I

contemplate how much literature exists in Sanskrit on the subject that I cannot begin to fathom. But Sanatan is right that we focused on the issues head on without being distracted by politics. True, we came close to getting into politics at times but wisely explored the ethical aspects involved rather than becoming ideological and factional. In sum, I feel positive, reconstructed, rejuvenated and inspired as a result of participating in this seminar and sticking around to the end. I think Mahatma Gandhi said that the end does not justify the means . . .

Navin: Yes, Sanskriti, he insisted on the purity of the means as much as on that of the ends.

Sanskriti: Thank you, Navin, for confirming my intuition. In the case of this seminar, I believe that we have preserved and practiced that dictum of Gandhi. We reached the end, that is, a moderate Hinduism, which is our blueprint for a Hinduism for Today. We can truly be proud of this achievement. At the same time, it is to be noted that we arrived at it through a process that took nothing for granted and allowed free and open discussion of everything that came up. We had our disagreements at the start and some persist to the moment. But we have reached a Hinduism for Today that has a solid foundation which allows for individual building and development. It is also universal and humanistic in its appeal.

There exists much empty platitudinal rhetoric, which asks Hindus to be proud of being Hindu. It is understandable in light, or rather darkness, of the diffidence of Hindus brought about by pervasive negativism about Hinduism that has filled the environs of Hindu life. What we have done here can easily fill that emptiness, platitudes and rhetoric with well thought out substance that compares terrifically with anything that anyone can throw at it from any direction and from any time in history of the humanity. A job well done, folks, congratulations! Now relax, enjoy and relish for a while before thinking of further things to do. There are lots of things to do but our Hinduism does not teach just meditating in a cave to the end of time. At the same time it recognizes and incorporates all major spiritual paths devised by the human mind or spirit. Just what we needed, when asked the question exactly what are you proud of as a Hindu? In my enthusiasm I did not make the last sentence as elegant as a stylist would expect. But does it matter?

All: No!

Sevak: I find myself excited to the point of being speechless. That is unusual for me. But there I am. You folks said it all and left virtually nothing for me to say. I do not see a point in reiterating it. Well done, everybody. I cannot overemphasize it. You have done very commendable, and nothing short of illustrious, work. Your spirit of cooperation and collaboration has been exemplary. It was also sustained throughout our sometimes lengthy sessions. This is perhaps the lengthiest session. After all, all good things too come to an end, as Madhyama said a little while ago. But we pick up the pieces and start again. That is why Hinduism has an oscillating theory of the cosmos that defies linear history. Even Nietzsche recognized this in his intriguing doctrine of eternal return. Right, Darshana?

Darshana: Close, Sevakji. No need to push accuracy for its own sake.

Sevak: Thanks, Darshana. Let us end here with congratulations and thanks to Anish, Darshana, Madhyama, Mahila, Navin, Sanatan and Sanskriti. You all have impeccable bona fides. You worked hard, thought hard and articulated a Hinduism for Today that is worthwhile not only for Hindus but spiritually aspiring men and women everywhere. You made this moment and should be proud of it. The seminar, needless to say, has had its few moments of exasperation but it has ended up energizing us quite positively. I feel vindicated in calling myself a constructive Hindu as I did at the outset. I am sure you will turn a good part of positive energy the seminar has generated for you into what needs to be done in the future. We have resolved that we will respond thoughtfully to all comments, suggestions and constructive criticisms that are brought to our attention. That may bring us back together at a future time.

All: Quite so!

Sevak: So, congratulations and thanks to all of you again. *Namas-te*!

All: *Namas-te*.

Sevak: We are not done completely, after all. Before going our ways for now, we must listen, thanks to Sanskriti, to Ustad Bismillah Khan's immortal shehnai coming down to us in raga Bhairavi from the holy city of Varanasi.

GLOSSARY OF SANSKRIT TERMS

Essential meanings are described briefly. Multiple meanings of a term are separated by semi-colons (";"). Most frequently used Sanskrit terms in Hindu literature are included. Of course this is not an exhaustive list, but it should prove quite useful.

Ahimsa nonviolence
Ananda bliss
Antah-karana inner sense; conscience
Apat difficult or trying circumstances
Apatti See *apat*
Aranyaka Forest Treatises, a class of Vedic literature, combining spiritual and mundane matters
Artha social values, one of four values of life. See *purushartha*
Ashrama stage of life. There are four *ashramas*. See *brahma-charya, griha-stha, vana-prastha* and *sannyasta.*
Atharva-veda one of the four *Veda*s
Atman self, spiritual essence of individual reality
Avatara divine incarnation, which can be *purna* or full, *amsha* or partial or *avesha* or inspirational
Bhagavad-gita Song of God, being a part of the epic *Maha-bharata*
Bhakti devotion, worship
Bhuta being; living being; gross elements of matter
Brahma God viewed in his aspect as creator
Brahma-charya conduct designed to atain *moksha* or spiritual freedom; celibacy, in word, thought and deed; the first, student's, stage of life
Brahman impersonal essence of reality
Brahmana social class of educators and clergy; Liturgical Treatises, a class of Vedic literature, comprising of commentary, explication and application of Vedic hymns
Chhandas metrics, prosody; one of six traditional areas of study to access the Vedas. See *vedanga*
Chit consciousness; pure consciousness behind the familiar subject-object duality
Dama restraint, self-control, temperance
Dana charity, giving
Darshana philosophy as vision of reality, divided between *astika* or *Veda*-accepting and *nastika* or *Veda*-rejecting. See *mimamsa, nyaya, sankhya, vaisheshika, vedanta* and *yoga*
Desha geographical region

Deva god or form of nurturing energy, usually indicating derivative divinity, as against God, who is primary divinity

Dharma moral fulfillment, one of four values of life. See *purushartha*. Divided between *samanya* or universal and *vishesha* or particular, of which *samanya* has logical primacy but has been unfortunately overshadowed by *vishesha.*

Gita popular name for *Bhagavad-gita*, which see

Griha-stha ashrama second stage of life, that of a householder

Guna string, constituent, energy strand; everything other than units of pure consciousness, whether mental or physical, consists of three *gunas* or energy strands called *sattva*, *rajas* and *tamas*. Also see *prakriti*

Guru personal spiritual guide

Ishta-deva chosen deity, a Hindu's chosen form to approach God for his or her personal worship

Ishvara God, primary divinity

Itihasa history, especially exemplary history used by sages to illustrate moral life. Two noted examples are the epics *Ramayana* and *Maha-bharata*

Jagat world, moving world shared by all living beings occupying common space. See *samsara*

Jati hereditary lineage, the caste community

Jiva individual soul

Jnana knowledge

Jyotisha electional astronomy, being one of six traditional areas of study to access the Vedas. See *vedanga*

Kala time

Kalpa liturgical observances, being one of six traditional areas of study to access the *Veda*. See *vedanga*

Kama desire; physical needs, one of four values of life. See *purushartha*

Karma action, especially actions of any individual that affect others; as a principle, called *karma-siddhanta*, it means the law of moral accountability, Biblically expressed as "As you sow, so do you reap," it leaves *samskaras* or impressions and *vasanas* or tendencies through which accountability is achieved; as a spiritual path, called *karma-yoga*, it means the spiritual discipline of doing one's duties and selfless work for humanity irrespective of rewards

Krishna God incarnate, eighth major incarnation of God, after Rama and before the Buddha. Krishna taught the *Bhagavad-gita* to the world, hence he is also called *Jagad-guru* or world teacher

Kshatriya social class of soldiers and police force, with assignment to maintain law and order

Lakshana definition. In Hindu logic definition is of two types: *sva-rupa* or internal and *tata-stha* or external, which see

Lakshmi Goddess in her aspect of preserving the universe . She particularly presides over wealth and prosperity, which are the primary means of preservation

Maha-bharata Largest epic in the history of world literature, consisting of about 100,000 verses. It depicts the war between good and evil. A Hindu text of *itihasa*, which see

Manu-smriti law book by Manu, an authoritative secondary scripture

Maya delimiter, pejoratively translated as "illusion", it stands for that which makes the spiritual infinite appear to be material finite, causing rather than being illusion of making the real look different from what it is

Mimamsa linguistic hermeneutics, orthodox Hindu philosophical system laying down rules of interpreting Vedic texts

Moksha spritiual freedom, being the highest goal, one of four values of life. See *purushartha*

Neti neti "not this, not that," celebrated Upanishadic way of indicating the ineffability of the ultimate spiritual source of the universe

Nir-guna Brahman ultimate spiritual reality in its pure state, without any mundane association with *guna* or energy strand. Akin to Godhead. See *guna*

Nir-guna upasana approaching the spiritual ultimate as beyond all forms and features

Nirukta exegetical hermeneutic, determining meanings of Vedic terms through their etymological origins, one of six traditional areas of study to access the Veda. See *vedanga*

Nish-kama selfless, without regard to rewards

Nyaya logical realism, Hindu philosophical system laying down nature and criteria of logical truth

Pancha-maha-yajna five great reciprocations, daily oblations to five elements of the eco-system to which all humans are indebted: *rishis* or sages, *pitris* or ancestors, *devas* or nurturing energies, *manushyas* or human community and *pashus* or animal kingdom

Prakriti nature, comprehensively including everything other than units of pure consciousness. It consists of three energy strands called *guna*, which see

Puja formal worship

Purana a genre of *smriti* or secondary scripture. There are eighteen *purana*s, all composed by the sage Veda-vyasa

Purusha person; in Sankhya, a unit of pure consciousness; triple source of individuality in the *Bhagavad-gita*

Purushartha four objects of human effort or values of life. See *artha, dharma, kama* and *moksha*.

Rajas kinetic energy strand, source of motion and passion. See *guna*

Rama seventh major incarnation of God, destroyer of the evil demon Ravana

Ramayana first poetic text of classical Sanskrit, depicting the exemplary life of God-incarnate Rama. A Hindu text of *itihasa*, which see

Rig-veda first of the Vedic texts, the oldest literary document in world history, part of primary Hindu scripture, collection of hymns invoking gods or forms of energy

Rishi sage, one who lives plain life devoted to spiritual discipline and universal welfare

Sa-guna Brahman ultimate spiritual reality involved with the *sattva-guna* or goodness. Same as God or *Ishvara,* which see. Also see *guna* and *sattva*

Sa-guna upasana approaching the spiritual ultimate as possessing all the beneficent attributes

Sa-kama desirous, indicating desire for reward

Samanya common, universal; a type of *dharma* or moral fulfillment. It is universal and is, therefore, applicable to all humans. See *dharma* and *vishesha*

Sama-veda third of the Vedic texts, containing hymns set to music

Samhita most ancient collections of hymns and other religious material. See *veda*

Samsara world, vertically flowing world created by individual's actions or *karma*, flowing from one body to another over time

Samskara impressions left by an action that will eventually lead to the proper consequence for its performer. See *karma*

Sankhya dualistic distinctionism, an ancient philosophical system of Hindus going back to the Vedas, metaphysical side of the system called *yoga*, which see

Sannyasta ashrama fourth and final stage of life of total devotion to spiritual pursuit

Sarasvati Goddess in her aspect of creating or manifesting the universe. Particularly, she presides over knowledge and learning as primal to creation

Sat being, existence or reality; pure being behind the universe

Sattva elucidative rule-abiding energy strand. See *guna*

Satya truthfulness; beneficence of all living beings

Shakti Goddess in her aspect of transforming or deconstructing the cyclical universe

Shastra scriptural teachings

Shiksha phonetics, being one of six traditional areas of study to access the Vedas

Shiva God viewed in his aspect of transformer or deconstructer of the cyclical universe

Shruti primary scripture, that which is heard or directly revealed to the sages, consisting of the four Vedas, to include all the *samhitas, brahmanas, aranyakas and upanishads*

Shuchi cleanliness, purity, purification, both internal and external

Shudra social class of artisans and labor force

Smriti secondary scripture, that which is remembered by the sages, including *itihasa, purana* and *smriti*s or law books

Sutra thread of aphorisms; style of writing classical Sanskrit texts in a very condensed manner needing commentaries to explain them

Sva-rupa lakshana internal definition that achieves its proper extension by describing the constituents and their relations

Tamas inertia, lethargic energy strand. See *guna*

Tapas austerity, performance of observances with strict discipline

Tata-stha lakshana external definition achieving its proper extension by mapping the object and placing it in its context

Tattva that-ness; essence of reality; essence of a principle

Upanishad Mystical Treatises, revealing the nature and relations of self, world, God and Godhead

Vaisheshika atomistic pluralism, a classical Hindu philosophical system, metaphysical side to *nyaya*, which see

Vaishya social class of farmers and merchants

Vana-prastha ashrama third stage of life, semi-retirement in spiritual pursuit as well as consultant to community

Varna social class

Vasana dispositions, being tendencies and habits created by repeated actions an individual chooses to perform. See *karma*

Veda primary scriptures divided into four collections of hymns and cognate religious material, called *Rig-veda*, *Sama-veda*, *Yajur-veda* and *Atharva-veda*

Vedanga six areas of study traditionally regarded as necessary for a comprehensive understanding of the *Veda* or the primary scripture. See *chhandas, jyotisha, kalpa, nirukta, shiksha* and *vyakarana*.

Vedanta most preeminent philosophical system of Hinduism, regards *Brahman* to be the primal source of all reality. It is divided in half a dozen sub-systems

Vishesha particular, specific; a type of *dharma* or moral fulfillment that is applicable to designated groups of individuals. See *dharma* and *samanya*

Vishnu God in his aspect of ruler and preserver

Vyakarana analytical and descriptive linguistics, being one of six areas of study to access the Vedas

Yajna reciprocal contribution, commonly and opaquely rendered as ritual sacrifice but in essence the metaphysical instrument through which all systematic change occurs in the universe

Yajnavalkya-smriti law book by the sage Yajnavalkya. An authoritative secondary scripture with a noted standing in courts of law

Yajur-veda second of the Vedic texts containing liturgical formulas

Yoga sum, addition, relation, nexus; in relation to spirituality a spiritual path leading to the actual experience of the ultimate reality; in philosophy the meditative philosophical system of Hindus, being the application side of *sankhya*, which see.

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Ramesh Patel taug[illegible]rses in all major areas of Western and Eastern philosophy. He retired from Antioch College in 2002 as Professor of Philosophy and Religion. He is the author of *Philosophy of the Gita* (Peter Lang, New York, 1991).

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